

Beyond Ethnic Traditions: Philosophies and Socio-cultural Relevance of the Ashanti and the Ewe Kente cloths

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Abstract

The socio-cultural symbolisms and aesthetics of the Ghanaian kente cloth has for years gained respect and recognition both locally and abroad. It has been used to define royalty, prominence and class. Its uniqueness is also seen in celebrating special occasions such as, birth, initiation, marriage, burial as well as honouring people for their patriotism. This paper examines the background of the Kente cloth in Ghana; addressing the diverse views of some schools of thought with regards its origin. (Fianu 2002; Ahiagble 2004). The paper explains the Ashanti's and the Ewe's hold on the Kente cloth as well as investigates the uses and the philosophies aligned with the motifs, and the reasons for creating the designs. By means of interviews and content analysis, the paper reports that both the Ashanti and Ewe Kente have their own uniqueness, but ultimately they have common functions with regards the symbols and meanings, as well as their use during rites of passage. The paper further establishes that though aesthetic lines may arguably be drawn between the kente of the two societies, there are no boundaries when projecting royalty as well as norms and virtues.

Key words: kente, philosophies, Ashanti, Ewe, norms, virtues, rites of passage.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the philosophies and norms embedded in both the Ashanti and Agotime kente cloths. It is pivoted by the hypothesis that the origin of the kente cloth is torn between the Ashanti and the Ewe of Ghana, yet both cloths have similar features when promoting virtues and norms, as well as projecting royalty and celebrating transitions in life. The Asante people are a sub-section of the Akan people in Ghana who live in the central part of Ghana, the Ashanti region and its surroundings. They have a vast territory and their land is known for containing very rich agricultural soil and natural minerals, especially gold. The Ashanti region consists of 27 districts and covers an area of 24, 681 square kilometres with a population of about 3,612,950. The regional capital is Kumasi, the biggest of all the districts in the Ashanti region and the largest in the Akan land. It is referred to as the Garden City of West Africa because of its beautiful flowers and plants. Akans comprises of the; Ashanti, Fanti, Akuapim, Akyem, Bono, Kwahu, Assen and some others (Nkansa-Kyeremateng 1996). Among the notable rich cloths of the Akan is the kente cloth, which is associated with the Ashanti, with its weaving industry found in Bonwire, near Kumasi (Fianu 2007).

The Ewe people are also one of the ethnic groups in Ghana. Their settlement starts from the eastern bank of the river Volta in Ghana and stretches to the western bank of the Mono River in the Republic of Togo. "The Atlantic Ocean forms the southern frontier of the Ewe community and the northern frontier is the mountainous area around Hohoe in Ghana and Atakpame in Togo". The whole settlement of the Ewe people is about 190 kilometres from east to west, from Kpong in Ghana to Grand Popo in Benin and 160 kilometres from north to south. From Atakpame in Togo to Denu in Ghana, are found a number of ethnic sub-groups such as the Avetime, Nyagbo and Tafi groups in Ghana and the Adja and Mina groups in the republic of Togo in Benin (Ahiagble 2004). One third of the people live in Ghana whilst the rest, two third are in Togo. The people are not only rich in their culture but also produce the famous ancestral handicraft kente cloth, *Agomevor*, whose origin dates around 1600. Kente weaving among the Ewe is some of the people sustenance and therefore small kente industries are found in their towns, however, today Ewe weavers are found in towns such as Kpetoe and Agbozume (Clarke 2002).

The article is organised around the origin of the kente cloth as maintained by both the Ashanti and the Ewe. It proceeds to investigate the norms and virtues aligned with the designs, what factors determined its production, and what lesson or information can be derived from the artistic tradition of both groups. It tries to find an answer to the question; do the motifs of the kente cloths have diverging views relating traditional governance, norms, and virtues, and when celebrating the rite of passage?

The kente cloth of Ghana produced by these two ethnic groups is a unique piece of artistry that has received universal patronage because of its designs and beauty. The cloth has thus received recognition both locally and

abroad (Ross 1998). Its designs have meanings that communicate some virtues of life, project and enhance royalty and also are used to uphold the various transitions of life. Consequently birth, initiation, marriage and death are appropriately associated with specific colours of the kente cloth and thus “worn for its beauty and symbolic significance” (Fianu 2007). The colours have meanings and thus determine the befitting occasion.

The kente cloth is made with several colours which can be defined within specific cultural context. To the Ghanaian, including the Ashanti and the Ewe, gold or yellow represents wealth, affluence, and prominence, therefore it is mostly reserved for traditional leaders. White symbolises joy and happy moments, whilst dark colours like black and red represent sadness, depression and death (Kwakye-Opong 2014). White kente is then associated with naming ceremonies, and other victorious occasions, while those with dark background are reserved for mourning. The designs of the cloth are also proverbial; an umbrella design for instance establishes the prestigious position of the wearer, as one who is capable of providing security for a people. This type of design is usually worn by traditional leaders, signifying that the subjects under their rule are protected by their wise council. These qualities are characterised by both the Ashanti and Ewe kente, giving the cloth a very prominent role among these societies (Fianu 2002; Ahiagble 2002). However, the origin of the cloth has become a bone of contention between these two ethnic groups. Each group claims to be custodians of the art. Through observation, interviews and content analysis, this paper tries to investigate these historic traditions, but ultimately highlights the philosophies, norms and virtues embedded in the cloths. It also suggests that traditional leaders should organize workshops and seminars through which these cultural values in the kente will be promoted for national development.

2. The Non-verbal Language of Cloth

Literature examined for this article on cloth generally revealed that for every society, culture or country, cloth or textile has a specific language conveyed through the meanings, symbols, philosophies and so on. Therefore for a person who is abreast with a particular culture, cloth communicates. (Kwakye-Opong 2011). All cultures around the world have cloths that are designated for special purposes or roles. Various writers have thus, dealt with the history of dress, including fabrics and their socio-cultural importance. (Clarke 2002; Tortora & Eubank 1994; Payne 1965; Barton 1969). Expanding on cloths with regards their meanings and symbolisms Barton for instance reports on the toga (a rectangular piece of cloth which is worn by draping it on the body of the wearer) used by the Romans. To her the toga has diverse roles in the Roman tradition (Payne 1965)

Tortora & Eubank further dilate on the toga used by the Romans around the 18th century. Thus, the Roman toga had “variety of distinguishing characteristics in shape, mode of decoration, colour, or form of draping. Its uniqueness was experienced in the way care was needed to fold it properly to balance the weight of the fabric. As a result, the writers have quoted Carcopino (1940) as reporting that:

The toga was a garment worthy of the masters of the world, flowing, solemn, eloquent, but with over-much complication in its arrangement and a little too much emphatic affection in the self-conscious tumult of its fold. It required real skill to drape it artfully. It required unremitting attention if the balance of the toga were to be preserved in walking, in the heat of a discourse, or amid the jostling of a crowd.

During most of the imperial period, the toga was the appropriate or required cloth to be used by the audience including the Emperor of the Roman Gladiatorial Combat and also for any event where a citizen was present as a Roman representative.

Each toga had specific functions, style and association. Togas for instance were worn by girls of royal birth until they married or reached age 16. The boys and girls of noble birth wore the toga praetextra, but the boys stopped using it at age 16 and rather used the toga pura. Mourning and death were identified with the toga pulla which is black or dark coloured. Victorious generals or other people who distinguished themselves in the society were honoured during special occasions with the toga picta which is purple and decorated with gold embroidery. (Tortora & Eubank 1994).

In a parallel account Clarke (2002) investigates cloths of various backgrounds such as the “Raffia Cloths of Zaire; Kente, Royal Cloth of Ashanti; Bogolan, Mud-Dyed Cloth of Mali and the Aso oke of the Yoruba”. Concerning the raffia cloth originating with the Congo Kingdom from Zaire, Clarke mentions that within the social ranking of the people the raffia played a unique role by “negotiating status and authority. As a result, among the Loango people, “royal approval is sought before a person could sell or buy, or even wear one of the important designs. Those who violate this restriction are executed”. The raffia cloth also projects some cultural norms and values in the society, particularly observed in their life cycle; birth, initiation marriage, death and funerals. Some of the social significance of the cloth includes: “using it to display a new born baby, to dress children at initiation, as presents to the family of a bride, as exchange on receiving a chieftaincy title, even as

payments of fines in court cases". Additionally, the cloth assumes a very relevant position during burial, where large quantities of the raffia are used to honour the burial of the wealthy people in the society (Clarke 2002).

In a similar vein, Clarke (2002) further helps readers to get insight into the important socio-religious, political, economic and cultural role of the aso oke ceremonial cloth of the Yoruba of Nigeria. By the people's tradition the aso oke is ranked with social status, wealth, and marked with good health and a 'fulfilled life'. Similar to the raffia of the Zaire people, the aso oke also functions contextually to celebrate birth, marriage, death and so on. There are thus a lot of "localized styles of more highly decorated aso oke cloths for a variety of ritual and ceremonial uses". For instance, the people of the Northern Bunu use different types of aso oke cloth and red clothes for the funeral of a chief. Among the Ijebu of Yoruba the aso olona cloth is also identified with royalty and ceremonial occasions. Some of the cloths are linked with philosophies, names and proverbs. The etu, for instance, is deep blue in colour and means guinea fowl; and "the cloth is likened to the bird's sprinkled plumage". According to a verse in Ifa divination, 'etu is the father of all cloths'. Moreover, a proverb also accords the cloth with respect reporting that "a man whose head has worn etu cap should never again carry a load." Literary the proverb asserts that a person who has been dignified by wearing the etu should be respected in the society. The cloth is also prominent at naming ceremonies; marriage ceremonies; festive occasions such as Christmas and Islamic holy days. (Clarke 2002).

Investigations on the Ghanaian *kente* cloth have gained scholarly focus by some writers. Reporting on *kente*, Amoako-Attah (2007), Fianu (2002), Clarke (2002), Ahiagble (2002) and Ross (1998) discuss the origin, names, meanings and significance of some *kente* motifs. Colours and their symbolisms are also investigated to define the social gratification and disposition of each cloth. All the writers assert that *kente* is a woven material of multiple colours used for ceremonial occasions and each pattern has a name and a message that it conveys. It is a century-old tradition of strip weaving very famous because of its association with royalty and the rites of passage. Writing about *Ghana's kente and Adinkra*, Fianu (2007) expands on the names and meanings of some *kente* motifs and how these philosophies are proverbial in building hope and confidence in wearers. To her the "Ewe *kente* looked dull while Ashanti ones look vividly bright" (2007).

In a related account, Asamoah-Yaw (1994) mentions that *kente* is made with two or several colour combinations, woven in geometric or pictogram shapes, originally created for Ashanti chiefs for ceremonial occasions. The cloth in its initial stages was made in black and white cotton yarn in basic patterns called *Ahwepan*. Impressively, discoveries made later in the years provided colourful threads like yellow or gold and red processed from the *Dua-Sika* and *kasie* trees respectively, resulting in colourful *kente* cloths with intricate patterns. As part of its import, the initial intention of weavers was to signal people (subjects) about the mood or social prominence of users (mostly royals); such that the *Abrempong-ntoma* (royal cloth) used during festive occasions easily identified Ashanti paramount chiefs, while the *Kyemea kente* was reserved for queen mothers.

The various writers have indicated that the beautiful colours such as gold, green, blue, white, purple, orange etc, and the numerous designs with which the *kente* cloth is presently made, have special symbolic messages that they communicate. Blue for instance represents peace, serenity and tranquility whilst white means purity. The designs are associated with legends or philosophies. Consequently Asamoah-Yaw (1994) reports that in the past the *Abusua-ye-dom kente* cloth was worn by Ashanti kingmakers, agitating for the removal of a stubborn chief.

The use of clothes has also helped to communicate a people's social and economic status. As a result Barton (1989), Opoku (1978), Kyeremateng (1965), Field (1961) have stated that African chiefs, queen mothers and some ritual experts dress to portray their position in the society. These high officials are usually distinguished with rich clothes and unique styles not used by the ordinary citizen. To Kyeremateng (1965) "...the uniqueness of the Ashanti king's [*Asantehenes*] *kente* lies not only in the artistry of its manufacture but also in the manner in which it is worn and the royal dignity it confers on the wearer". He stated further that in the past the *Ashanti* social tradition gave the *Ashantehene* the sole right to wear a specified width of the *nkyeretire* clothe. The quality, design and colours of the king's *kente* cloth must also prove his economic strength among his subjects. For instance to prove his economic viability the *Asantehene* is mostly dressed in gold or yellow colours, which as already noted represents wealth and prosperity. His social prominence is also identified by the use of restricted designs made by special weavers (Kwakye-Opong 2011).

The Ewe *kente* is also associated with names and meanings such as *Akpedo* (unity or togetherness). *Fiawoyome* literally means 'the chief's retinue'. The name is derived from '*ma tae manor fiawoyome*' simply saying, "Let me wear it and follow the chief". Chiefs usually wear white *kente* during festive occasions, and this cloth represents the social obligation of a chief to protect the community in a bid to continuity and survival. Chief's retinue wore this cloth in the olden days to identify them from other people in the palace. The designs represent social security, achievement, sustenance and progression (Ahiagble 2004).

In *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and American Identity*, Ross (1998) similarly describes the kente cloth of the Ashanti and that of Ewes as the “best known of all African Textiles ... so renowned internationally and admired in many parts of the world”. Tracing its origin to the Gold Coast of West Africa, the writer indicated that this special cloth was traditionally used by men as toga whilst their women wore it “as an upper and lower wrapper”. Yet over the past forty years, apart from its social functions especially in royal regalia and other rites (as has already been digested by the previous writers) kente has been prominent in academia, and Ross describes how in the USA academic gowns are designed in kente cloth or with kente strips to show class distinction. In a similar vein religious leaders such as bishops and other church officials wear robes decorated with kente cloths, in accordance with their religious obligations and positions. Hats, ties, shoes, slippers, bags, book covers, ornaments, band-aids, balloons and greeting cards are also designed with kente and marketed at home and abroad. Hence, its usage both religious or otherwise, is not seen with aesthetic appeals only but also the manner it “evoke and celebrate a shared cultural heritage bridging nations ... [because] kente remains the textile of choice for African Americans on many occasions that foreground issues of heritage and achievement” (Ross 1998).

3. Data Collection Procedure

On the basis of investigating the philosophies embedded in the Ashanti and the Ewe kente cloths, the qualitative research method, which primarily focussed on content analysis, observation and interviews were used. This decision was arrived at because Ruderstam and Newton (1992) have asserted that qualitative methods are “especially useful in the generation of categories for undertaking human phenomena and the investigation and meaning that people give to events they experience”.

I attended about 4 naming, and 8 marriage ceremonies, to conduct random interviews for the people’s views on the use of kente designs and their symbolisms. Existing literature were also analysed to compare and confirm the historic perspective as well as the norms and virtues of both cloths among the Ashanti and the Ewe.

The targeted and accessible population was taken from Accra, the Capital of Ghana. This choice was made because Accra is a cosmopolitan city where almost all the ethnic groups in Ghana live. Again kente sellers are found all over Accra; some operate from shops while a greater portion, mostly bring kente from Kumasi and sell at virtually all work places.

A total of 40 interviewees were purposively sampled; they consisted of three categories or strata of people including (a) chiefs, chiefs, priests and priestesses, king makers, queen mothers, kente sellers/weavers and other older men and women. (b) lecturers, teachers, cultural officers, research fellows, heads of schools and students in both secondary and tertiary levels and (c) fashion designers, cloth sellers, tailors, beauticians, dressmakers, barbers and the youth in general. Even though the sample was taken from a homogenous population the categories of three strata are not the same. In that, as custodians, historians and traditionalists, chief priests, priests/ priestesses, queen mothers and elders form one category because of their knowledge in the historical trends in clothing and adornment. Lecturers, research fellows, assistant lecturers, teachers, cultural officers and students who are empowered through research work are categorized into one group. The third category of fashion designers, cloth sellers, tailors, dressmakers, beauticians and so on was grouped because of their common interest and anxiety to follow fashion trends in order to satisfy their numerous clients.

The relevance of this grouping buttressed the existing literature and also helped in gathering views concerning the historical facts and the present state of the kente cloth. Again a population with similar traits is needed in establishing the history, preferences and people’s knowledge of the designs and their meanings so that knowledge gained by the part will be extended to the whole (Kumepkor 2002).

Data collected through the purposive and random interviews, together with written reports were all analysed to draw authentic and inferred conclusions.

4.0 The Origin, Symbolic interpretations and the Social implications of the Ashanti and the Ewe kente Cloths.

This part of the article focuses on the discussion; to examine the history of the kente cloth. The symbols or designs is also analysed in terms of their meanings, virtues and norms. It further tries to examine how the Ashanti and the Ewe have used kente in relation to the rite of passage.

4.1.1 The History of the Ashanti kente

According to Ashanti oral source, kente was brought to Kumasi around 1700, after the Ashante have defeated the people of Techiman in war and holding them captive. The Techiman people were believed to have acquired the skill in kente weaving from the Northern part of Ivory Coast, and therefore came with it to teach their ‘masters’. Another version of Ashanti oral tradition notes that the first weaver, Otah Kraban, brought a loom back to Bonwire after a journey to Bondoukou region of Côte d’Ivoire (Clarke 2007) There is yet another myth

suggesting that two Ashanti hunters observed and learnt kente weaving from the way a spider designs its web; like the basket (*kenten*), presumably corrupted to kente (Fianu 2007; Amoako-Attah 2007) One noteworthy achievement of the Ashanti is therefore linked with the art of weaving kente cloth for “the king, of Ashanti Empire which extended over much of present-day state Ghana”. Much of the yarn were supplied through cotton weaving, until later in time when raw material in the form of silk fibre were imported from Europe,. The art is mostly identified with the Bonwire people whose livelihood depends on this legacy from their forefathers. In most of the kente cloths, the motifs are achieved by alternating regularly positioned blocks of pattern in bright-coloured silk with the more silent colours of the wrapped stripped plain weave background. Interestingly, it is the background designs, the configurations of warp stripes that inform most pattern names. “In a tradition so interested in proverbs and verbal wordplay, there is a large vocabulary of design names still remembered by elderly weavers ... names such as Atta Birago and Afua Kobi, refer to the individuals, in these cases two Queen mothers, for whom the designs were first woven”. Other patterns refer to historical incidents, to household objects, to proverbs, or to certain circumstances of the cloth's use (Clarke 2002).

Around the nineteenth century when Britain imposed their form of governance on Ashantis, their indigenous traditions existed alongside a “new bourgeois class of local inhabitants” whose desire for excellence marched that of their foreign masters, and the traditional rulers. These group of people therefore started using the kente cloth. The African market was then onwards introduced to silk scarfs brought by the European merchants. Weavers loosened the fabric and used the silk in designing a type of kente cloth known as *Serekye-kente* (kente made with kente). With this new dimension therefore, (before the First World War, around 1914) the fine-cotton kente cloth co-existed with that of the silk and rayon, or a combination of the two, obtained from the Chinese and the Indian merchants (Kwakye-Opong 2011).

4. 1.2 Ashanti kente and socio-cultural Importance

Transitions in life and festive occasions have also been identified with different types of Kente. White Kente is usually reserved for happy moments such as celebrating birthdays, outdoorings and naming of a child; honouring a girl during puberty rites; marriage ceremonies; dressing the dead especially royals. It is also worn during Thanksgiving Services at church in appreciation for something Christians believe God has done for them. Kente is also presented as a gift to show appreciation, as well as to honour patriotic nationals. Gold, red, purple, and other multi-coloured kente cloths are used during marriage ceremonies. Today the bride and groom and family members may decide to wear a particular colour of Kente such as orange, purple, blue and so on. Annual festivals are also climaxed with bright Kente cloths, where Paramount chiefs and other chiefs wear kente with special design to distinguish them from the ordinary citizen. This is possible because these royals have special weavers who create unique designs that are not seen in the market.

In an attempt to highlight and promote the kente cloth, the people and chief of Bonwire have instituted the Kente festival. The festival is celebrated every two years mostly during the last quarter of the year, around October. “As part of activities for the celebration of the festival, exhibition is mounted to showcase kente cloths and its accessories like kente stole, ties, bags, bookmarks etc”. The import of the kente festival is to remember their ancestors, especially those who are credited with the origin of the cloth (Amoako-Attah: 2007).

4. 1.3 The designs, meanings and ideals of the Ashanti kente

As noted already on a preceding page, the Ashanti kente has communicating messages to the society and by extension, all wearers. The *Adwinasa kente* properly portrays the exhaustion or end of all creativity maintaining, that creative piece is the best ever made therefore second to none. A kente cloth with the sun motif (*Owia*) also symbolizes life giving energy, cosmic power, divine power, advancement and progress whiles the zigzag pattern (*Nkyimkyim*), indicates prudence, balance and vigilance in pursuit of a successful life. Others with similar characteristics include: *Emma da* which literally means we have not seen its likeness before, or this is one of a kind, is synonymous with good governance. (Amoako-Attah 2007; Asamoah-Yaw 1994).

Fathia fata Nkrumah (fig.1) means “Fathia is the right wife of Nkrumah. The cloth was dedicated to the marriage between Fathia, an Egyptian lady and Nkrumah, the first President of the Republic of Ghana and a Pan-Africanist”. The cloth represents an honourable marriage, mutual affection, nobility, elegance and the ideals of Pan-Africanism.

Akosombo Nkanea, shown in figure 2 means “lights of Akosombo”. The cloth gets its name from the hydroelectric dam at Akosombo, in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The cloth is created in the form of sparkling lights expressing social progress, knowledge and advancement in national development.

Owia Repue (fig.3), means “the rising sun” and the design is derived from the horizon. To Akans the sun is the

source of divine power, the giver of spiritual and physical energy. This motif symbolizes balance of power, democratic fairness and duality of the essence of life.

Ododow Ase Nhye (fig.4), means when the people are many, it is difficult to extinct them. “The cloth expresses the Akan social concept that stresses the need for numerical expansion of the family”. This ensures survival of the family, and its positive effect on society. The Akan believes that it is difficult to destroy a people with a united front and thus the cloth’s name represents togetherness, “responsibility, unity, growth productivity, survival and prosperity”.

BoafoYe Na (fig.5), means “helping hands do not come by so readily”. The symbols “ expresses the Akan social thought and code of conduct that recognise that genuine help is golden and does not easily come by. One is expected to be self- reliant and not wait for such a rare social commodity”. It is expected that a person expresses due appreciation when help is offered. The cloth then represents the weight of sincere help and the value of genuine appreciation.

Mpuannum (fig. 6) means “five tuft haircuts of royal attendants”. One person cannot form a jury is the message of the cloth, and it is a “symbol of democratic rule, justice and collective responsibility”. This design is associated with the *kuronti ne akwamu* cloth which represents balance of power, democratic and duality of the essence of life (Fianu 2007; Amoako-Attah 2007)

Epieakye literally means, “Behind a stronghold. It is a stronghold for the people of Ashanti. Mostly, the Asante colours are used in its weaving, which include: green, black and yellow”. A second school of thought has it that, *Epieakye* is derived from the word *Etwie*, the Akan name for leopard (Fosu 2007). This kente design, *Epieakye*, then refers to the rough zigzag skin of the tiger, which represents the strong and dauntless nature of the Ashanti.

Yenni Hene Kwa literally means “It is not easy to be a Chief or a King. A lot is required of a Chief/King. A Chief/King should be noble, avoid all social vices and talk against them, should be accepted by society, respected, intelligent ,wise, be able to mobilize funds for development projects, tell the truth all the time hence, *Yenni Hene Kwa*” (Fosu 2007)

Quite recently, however, new kente designs have emerged as a means of creating more awareness among the people. According to Auntie Akosua a kente seller from Kumasi, some of these current names include *Free Education*; which promotes the value of education. This design was actually created to commensurate one aspiration of the presidential candidate of the New Patriotic Party, during the 2012 election. *Mrs. Kuffour*, is another current design made to honour the wife of a former president of Ghana, His Excellency John Agyekum Kuffour. The design is created “to portray her as a loving, caring and ideal mother of all times” (Amoako-Attah 2007).

4.2.1 The History of the Ewe kente

The Ewe people are not only rich in their culture but also produce the famous ancestral handicraft Kente cloth, they call Agomevor, whose origin dates to the 16th century. ”. According to their oral tradition, far back into history the Ashanti held the ancestors of Agotime captives of war, among which were skillful weavers. In order to break the language barrier and be able to teach Ashantis the craft, the Ewe employed basic Ewe words such as *kee* (to press the thread in order to create the shed) and *tee* (which means using the reed to press the weft yarn and make it compact). The original *Ewe* name for kente, *Agbamevo*, derived from two words: *agba* (loom) and *avo* (cloth) was therefore replaced with *kee* and *tee* which were put together as *keete* and perhaps corrupted as kente. To Ahiagble *Ewes* were the first people to bring the art of kente weaving from Notsie in Togo or probably from an earlier site. And from that period down to the present; “within Ewe culture, kente has thus become a visual presentation of history, oral literature, philosophy, moral principles, religious beliefs and rules of social conduct” (Ahiagble 2004).

In a documentary on the Ewe Agotime kente, Nene Neur Keteku111, Konor of Agoteme Traditional Area, noted that before the western world started weaving cloth, Ewes of Agoteme had their own style of weaving. It was not then referred to as Kente weaving but simply as cloth weaving. The craft started from ancient Egypt, their former abode, where they were weaving with raw cotton. They initially used hand woven twines which were very thick but today because of modernisation, the thickness has reduced; giving the cloth a lighter look and texture. Weavers presently use imported threads of assorted colours which are comparatively thinner, and ease the production process. Enormous kente cloths are produced in several centres among the people. The uniqueness of the Ewe kente is confirmed by its warp and weft, and also by the symbolic or abstract motifs that are woven unto the cloth.

4.2.2 The Ewe kente, the Rite of passage and other Social implications

Similar to the social classification of the Ashanti kente, the Ewe ones are worn with pride as well as “bodily adornment and object of unity associated with rites of passage and other rituals”. It is often used during the rites

for the parents of newborn twins, puberty rites, marriage ceremonies and ordination of priests/priestesses, project royalty and honour people who have distinguished themselves in the society. For example, to honour the Ewe girl, she is adorned with the *agble* kente cloth when she sees her first menstruation (Ahiagble 2004). To preserve their clothing culture, the people of Agoteme celebrate an annual Kente Festival to remember historic facts about their origin and migration to their present settlement, as well as “to commemorate the past and present achievements of the weaver in the area”. During the festival, chiefs, visitors including dignitaries and the indigenes dress in kente to honour and project the significance of the cloth.

A person’s financial standing is noted by wearing a specific kente. Consequently, paramount chiefs, divisional chiefs and elders wear bright kente cloths during durbars and enstoolment to show nobility and wealth. Straps of kente are also used to adorn royal regalia such as umbrella, stools, drums and musical instruments. Red and white kente may be used by the traditional priests and priestesses to cover their gods or sometimes used as door curtain of the shrine. According to Ahiagble (2004) “the red colour is said to signify the sacrifices performed to these gods and the white signifies the food served to the gods”. Kente cloth can also be presented in appreciation for something a priest/ priestess has done for a person. The cloth has a special spiritual connotation. As a result, old kente cloths are believed to hold the spirit of the ancestors, which serves as a spiritual anchor to a family. Just like the stools and jewellery at the court, such kente cloths are preserved and handed over to successive generations.

4.2.3 The Meanings, Norms and Philosophies of the Ewe kente

In terms of symbols and meanings, a parallel can be drawn between the Ashanti and Ewe kente cloths; to project some social norms and virtues among the people. The *Togodo* or *Adanuvo* shown in figure 9 portrays the crafty nature of the Ewe weaver, with more realistic designs of 24 small squares surrounding each symbol. The 24 small symbols has a historic import that notes the 24 days their ancestors took to elude king Agorkoli at Notrie in Togo and settle at Ketu in the Volta region before embarking their migration to other parts of the region. The various figures symbolise that despite the large size of the world with its numerous challenges, one can maintain balance through vigilance and prudence.

Worn in the past by kings and people of high status and wealth, *Togodor* or *Adanuvo* cloth symbolises superior craftsmanship, royalty and creativity. Some of these symbols include: butterfly, chameleon, comb, wild gecko crocodiles joined at the back and many others (Ahiagble 2004). Nene Neur Keteku 111 further explained that, the wild gecko symbol for instance cautions people to be retrospect with their secrets, because in the most secrete places or rooms, the reptile (wild gecko) is inevitably present. The cloth thus tells us to be mindful of how we talk so that we don’t let out our secrets that we might have as individuals and invariably as a community. The wild gecko symbol represents silence.

The crab motif is also created to denote firmness or determination, because the notion is that when a crab gets hold of something, it holds it with all its strength and will never let go, even under severe forceful circumstances. In this regard, a person must get a proper hold of life; ever determined to even fight with the last drop of his blood.

The use of the umbrella motif is to sensitize the people on the need for governance; a required way for a people to be guarded and protected with the rules and regulations of the land. The design is therefore created for the paramount chief of a traditional area to project his authority and supremacy over the whole area.

The scorpion design woven in the cloth communicates awareness. The scorpion is a dangerous reptile that favours nobody. Its sting does not eliminate close friends, consequently society is cautioned against close associates; “especially those we can call friends, because they are closer to us and thus know our innermost secrets that when revealed might cause our total destruction”.

Other philosophical undertones of the Ewe kente include, *Akpedo* (*Novie*)-fig.7- *Akpedo* means “together or unity” and explains a popular Ewe proverb “two heads are better than one, or one tree does not make a forest”. This old adage symbolises unity and peace and thus expresses “the social value of collectively sharing the wealth and knowledge created by individual members of the society, who are bound together by their close relationship. *Babadu* (fig.10), literary means termites have eaten. The cloth appears like termites have destroyed it and reaffirms the proverb: ‘death is inevitable.’

Wohatsi Nata means you too can wear it and symbolises contentment and beauty. *Lokpo* (fig.11) literally means the back of the crocodile. This symbol ties in with the Ewe popular saying, ‘crocodiles do not drown in a river no matter how deep the river is’. This edge denotes that no problem is too difficult to drown a person, and this symbolises endurance, enlightenment and confidence.

Gbadegbenyo (fig.12), means “the happy days are gone”. The European Trans-Atlantic slave trade eroded the peace and tranquillity enjoyed by their ancestors, which brought bitterness and separated homes and

communities. “This cloth therefore symbolises the unity, peace and self- sufficiency which our forbearers once enjoyed as one people with a common ancestry and destiny.

Lornorwuho (fig.13) ‘love is precious’. This cloth is one of the most cherished items used during marriage ceremonies, and always included in paying the bride price to signify love and respect for the bridegroom. It represents love, humility and perfection.

Nlornlordzanyi (fig.14), literary interprets ‘the writing has come to stay’, and promotes the system of governance where the traditional leaders corporates with the offices of governmental bodies to establish by-laws and regulation to ensure good governance. It therefore represents authority, development and patriotism. The table below shows some Ewe kente designs and their meanings (Ahiabile2007)

Table 1: Meanings of some symbols woven into Togodo/ Adanuvo and other cloths

Symbol	Meaning
Armpit talking drum	Praise, adoration, oral history , translation and poetic skill
Bird	Merry making
Butterfly	Punctuality
Bicycle pedal	Progress
Cowry	Wealth , luck and fertility
Crocodiles joined at the back	People with a common interest should not quarrel with each other
Elephant	Kingship
Knife	Symbol of efficiency, productivity and sharpness
Hand	Peace
Ladder	A tool of achieving greater heights
Scorpion	Bitterness

5.0 A Comparative Analysis of the Ashanti and the Ewe kente Symbols and other socio- cultural use.

Both the Ashanti and Ewe have a lot of things in common. They both produce intricate warp and weft designs that are characterised by their names. Significantly, the motifs have cultural representation among the communities. The Ashanti kente has a characteristic of geometric shapes woven in bright colours such as yellow, bright green, bright blue and red or magenta. The Ewe kente has a unique pattern which symbolize human beings, animals and objects like combs, chairs and tables as well as letters and simple phrases which are incorporated into the design. However, the Ewe colours are relatively calm or muted yellow, red, green, black, white and blue. They both use similar equipment and production processes; “they weave similar sized narrow strips which are joined to form pieces of cloth.

Occasions such as naming, initiation, marriage and death are associated with similar colours of the kente cloth. This includes the *Gbato* and the *Bragoro*, the girl’s initiation rite to adulthood, respectfully celebrated by the Ewe and Ashanti. Likewise, kente plays a dominant part in the chieftaincy institutions of the two ethnic groups, at annual festivals, as well as honouring the body of their dead royals. To preserve the image of the cloth, kente festivals are celebrated annually by both of them.

The kente cloths in their cultural perspectives are not only body attire but have significant cultural values. Even though each ethnic group has different symbols, their interpretations in highlighting, royalty, maturity, love, prudence, endurance, patriotism and survival are the same. In promoting and revering traditional governance, for instance the motifs in both cloths help people to obligatory adhere to such traditions for a healthy life. In promoting love, loyalty, unity, good governance and so on, for peaceful co-existence the designs in the cloths have a similar focus.

Akosombo Nkanea, and *Owia Repue* designs of the Ashanti, as well as the Ewe’s *Nlornlordzanyi* and *Fiawoyome* all symbolise good governance. *Yenni Hene Kwa* which means it’s not easy to be chief or king and *Togodo* on the other hand also symbolise the institution of chieftaincy juxtaposed with loyalty, vigilance and wisdom.

Norms and virtues like love and unity are also very common symbolisms in both kente cloths of the Ashanti and Ewe; *Fathia fata Nkrumah* and *Lorlorwuho* respectfully symbolise love or mutual affection. *Ododow Ase Nyhe*, *Akedo* and *Gbadegbenyo* have a common theme of unity.

Some philosophies are also embedded in both cloths. The Ewe *Babadu* design creates awareness on the inevitability of death; for people to be retrospect in life. Death can come at any time so we should be mindful of that, and plan our lives well. With the *Epeiakye* design of the Ashanti, people are advised to be diligent, unrelenting, bold and steadfast in life. In fact they should fight until it is completely over.

Table 2. A Comparative Study of some Semiotics of the Ashanti and Ewe kente Designs

Ethnic Group	Governance	Norms and Values	Philosophies
Ashanti	<i>Akosombo Nkanea</i> “National development and social progress”	<i>Fathia Fata Nkrumah</i> “Love and mutual affection”.	<i>Yenni Hene Kwa</i> It takes wisdom and insight to succeed as a ruler.
	<i>Owia Repue</i> “Balance of power and democratic fairness”.	<i>Ododow Ase Nyhe</i> Unity and strength; the pivot of survival.	<i>Epieakye</i> Courage and determination are needed to combat lives challenges.
	<i>Mpuanum</i> “Democratic rule, justice and collective responsibility”	<i>Boafo Ye Na</i> “Kindness, gratitude and self-reliance”	
Ewe	<i>Fiawoyome</i> Good governance is a means to continuity and survival.	<i>Akpedo</i> Unity, peace and social development.	<i>Togodo</i> Regardless of the numerous challenges in life, balance can be maintained through vigilance and prudence.
	<i>Nlornolordzanyi</i> “Authority, development and patriotism.”	<i>Gbadegbenyo</i> “Peace, unity and self-sufficiency”	<i>Babadu</i> “Death is inevitable”
		<i>Lokpo</i> “Endurance” <i>Lorlorwuho</i> “Love is precious”	<i>Wohatsi Nata</i> “Endurance, enlightenment and confidence”

Conclusion.

The paper has so far explored the meanings, symbols and the philosophies embedded in both the Ashanti and Ewe kente cloths. The various writers have also established how the cloths are similarly portrayed with regard to royalty and during the rites of passage. Undoubtedly, the meanings, symbols and philosophies underlying both cloths go beyond ethnic traditions, because kente is a Ghanaian textile traditionally and closely linked with royalty, especially among the Ewe and Ashanti people. Although the development of the art of kente weaving cannot be attributed to these two ethnic groups alone, the evolution of this unique form of artistic expression has been identified with them to a large extent. The Agoteme people and the Ashanti produce kente clothes of a kind, yet the two types have much in common. Oral values, figurative principles are used to communicate to the people who understand their symbols. There are values for human existence all embedded or inscribed in the kente cloth. Specific designs and motifs are educative; they thus express the way of life of the people. The cloth is used for important and social events including the rite of passage.

The meanings and names of the cloths again have associations with good governance, moral alertness and confidence. The kente festivals celebrated annually by both ethnic groups are a plus to the promotion of the cloth; however, its added focus should be to help the people learn about the symbols and their relevance to nation building. Even though some older people claim they buy kente based on its symbols, most of the youth proved otherwise. 30% of the people in strata 1 buy kente based on its names and meanings. While 25% of strata 3 have some fair knowledge about kente symbols, only 2% in strata 2 responded in the affirmative when asked; “if they will buy kente based on its designs”. As a result, about 98% of this group (strata 2) confirmed they don’t even know the names of the kente cloth, in order for it to affect their choice. Samples of response from selected interviewees can be identified with table 2.

The paper finally suggests that though the origin of the cloth is an important historic archive, people must look beyond the real custodians and instead focus on the symbols, meanings and philosophies in the motifs, and most importantly its ability to reveal a sense of socio-cultural development. Instead of struggling with the origin of the cloth, the author thinks society should rather take a deeper reflection on the underlying message from the kente designs that are bedrocks of co-existence and national development. The core factor is that both of the cloths have a central focus; good governance, unity, prudence, love and prosperity, therefore, traditional leaders should organise workshops and seminars through which these values will be projected.

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Table 2 Samples of some selected response from some Interviewees

Name	Range Age	Sex	Status	Reason for choice of kente.
David Quaye	40-45	Male	Lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When growing up I learnt the value of kente and other cloths such as velvet and that a national should get at least two different types of kente for ceremonial occasions. • Presently I have two kente cloths; one black and white and the other red, gold and black. • I bought these cloths to fit different occasions such as marriage and national festivals and not because of their names. In fact I don't even know most of the names.
Mercy Kuffour	40-50	Female	Architect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know most of the names of the kente designs and sometimes buy them based on the names. • But most often I buy because of the colour and the beauty.
Nana Osei Ababio III (Paramount Chief of Hweee Traditional Area)	50-60	Male	Traditional Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a chief my clothing assistant help me with what I wear, and with the help of my special weaver I always stands out among the crowd. • I know most of the names of the designs because you have to learn them before you ascend the throne. • Most people are ignorant of the designs and what they seek to accomplish.

Auntie Adwoa Mansah	40-45	Female	Kente Seller	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have been in this kente business for about 20 years, and have come to realize that the old people buy because of the designs. Most people buy my kente cloth not because of the name but for its beauty. The youth especially, look at the beauty and the latest or the most fashionable ones. However old people prefer those with names. There are new types of kente designs such as “free education”.
Sarah Nsiah	30-35	Female	Administrative Secretary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have four kente cloths for my personal use. I bought a light green, orange for my mother as a present for taking care of me when I was sick. I presented one with a white background to my father on his 60th birthday. I wear kente on days I want to feel good, and not necessarily on special occasions. The names of the kente cloth have never influenced my choice.
Benjamin Kutor	50-60	Male	Banker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have one kente cloth; white and yellow which was a present given to me. I don’t even know the name of the cloth and don’t care to know.
Eric Klugesin	17-25	Male	Production Assistant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have one kente cloth which was apparently a school cloth, worn for traditional day at church on Sundays at Suhum Secondary Technical. I learnt about some philosophies of the kente cloth on the first Sunday at school when each student stood in front of the whole school and identified his kente cloth and what it stood for. I will buy kente for its beauty because the name does not interest me.

Mary Owusu Birago	55-60	Female	Administrative Secretary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have 5 kente cloths; 3 were presents and the other two were bought by me. I wear kente for ceremonial occasions. The colours and the names really attract me.
Elikem Akapko	40-45	Male	Kente weaver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I weave kente to sell. My designs are based on existing ones, as well as those our customers request for. I know most of the names, but recently I have realized people are not so much bothered about them, let alone what they represent.

* The names have been changed.

Some Ashanti kente Designs



Figure 1 *Fathia fata Nkrumah*

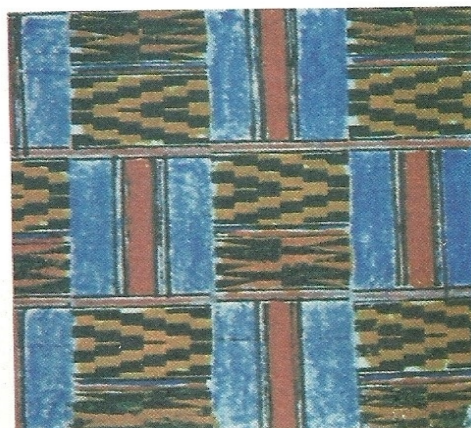


Figure 2 *Akosombo Nkanea*

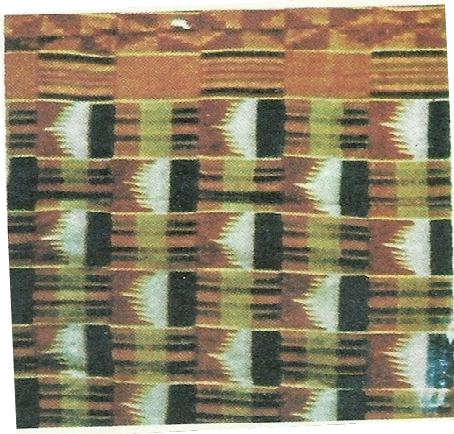


Figure3 *OwiaRepue*

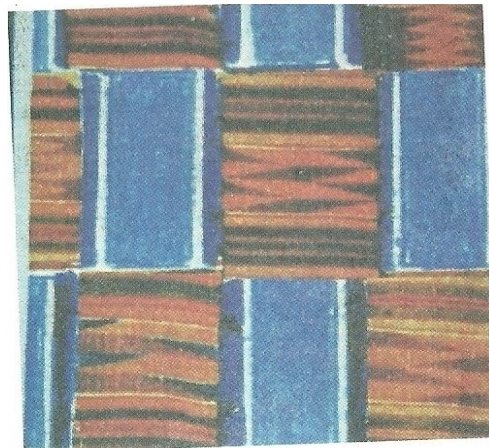


Figure 4 *OdodowAse Nyhe*



Figure5 *Boafo Ye Na*

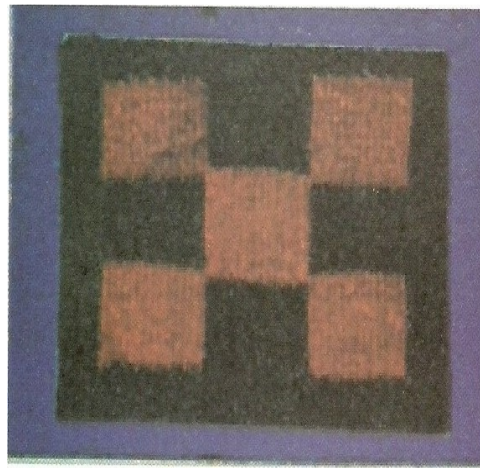


Figure 6 *Mpuannum*

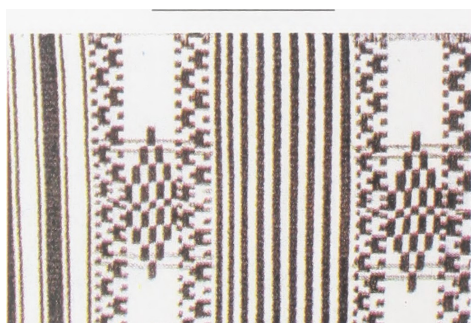


Figure 7 *Yenni Hene Kwa*



Figure 8 *Epieakye*

Some Ewe Kente Patterns

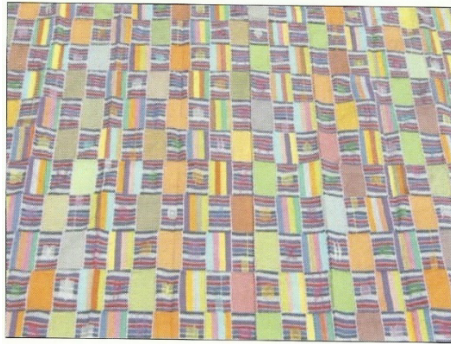


Figure 9 *Akpedo (Novie)*



Figure 10 *Fiawoyome*



Figure 11 *Togodo (Adanuvo)*



Figure 12 *Babadu*



Figure 13 *Lokpo*



Figure 14 *Gbadegbenyo*

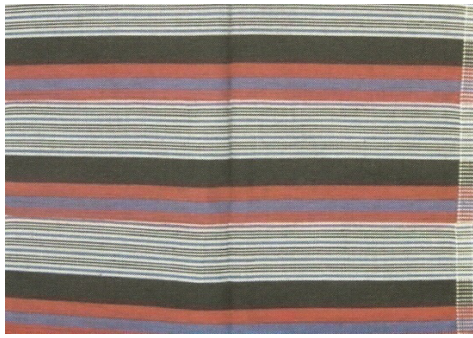


Figure 15 *Lorlorwuho*

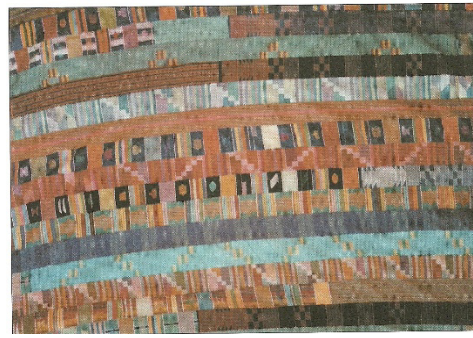


Figure 16 *Nlorlordzanyi*

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