

Museum Exhibit Report

Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity

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Exhibit Description and Critique

Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity showcases the historical, cultural, and political significance of kente cloth through its evolution in Ghana and surrounding areas of Africa as well as its assimilation into modern-day African American culture. Through a varied assortment of Asante and Ewe kente fabrics, photographs, and written information, as well as demonstration areas showing the creation and marketing of these fabrics, the viewer not only discovers the inherent beauty of the fabric itself, but the critical importance of these fabrics in their cultural context.

At the front entrance, the viewer meets with a dazzling array of fabrics hanging on the walls of the exhibit area. The first cloths that the viewer sees are relatively modern "royal" kente, normally worn only by rulers and other high-status individuals for ceremonial and festive occasions. The bright colors, primarily golds, reds, greens, and blacks, as well as the abstract motifs of the Asante-style kente capture the viewer's interest immediately. A written/pictorial display in this area describes the various styles and motifs typically used in Asante kente. Several examples of older fabrics and "everyday" kente are also on display in this room, showing the diversity in the cloth of this area of Africa. Though these fabrics, with their more muted colors and simpler

designs, do not dazzle like the "royal" kente, their craftsmanship and style are unmistakable.

In an adjacent room hang numerous examples of Ewe-style kente. The Ewe people typically use more muted earth tone colors in their cloth, as well as figurative rather than abstract motifs in their designs. Included in the Ewe room is an unusual kente banner with lettering woven into the design, created as a presentation piece.

For each of the fabrics, limited information is provided on an adjacent printed card. Typically the information consists of the approximate date of the textile, the type of yarn used, perhaps a limited description of the type of textile, and the current ownership of the textile. A viewer who wants a more complete description of the textile construction will need to refer to the display near the front of the exhibit, which describes the typical patterns and motifs in kente. (Note: a printed handout with this information would prove very useful for the true textile enthusiast.)

Farther back in the exhibit is a large display area. Two working strip-cloth looms set up to show how the cloth is woven, along with an assortment of weaving tools and yarns. A video shows the actual weaving process from start to finish. Also in this area is a display showing an Asante ruler with attendants seated under an umbrella, as if watching a ceremony or festival. The ruler and attendants are attired in kente and the accompanying ornaments and jewelry to show how this cloth would typically be used.

Additional areas in the exhibit show other aspects of the kente culture. A typical market booth is set up, with kente cloths and objects made from kente on display as if for sale. Photographs of famous persons such as Muhammad Ali and world leaders such as Bill and Hillary Clinton attired in kente line the walls. A special area is devoted to kente in Atlanta, with a number of local individuals photographed in kente and discussing the personal importance of kente to them. A small area displays examples of strip-woven kente as well as broadloom and printed kente for viewers to handle, while another small room (closed on our visit) has kente and accompanying ornaments for the viewer to try on. Next to this area is a display of the photographic work of Ephraim Agawu, known as Simple Sly, who has spent much of the past decade photographing small children dressed as chiefs and queen mothers, in kente regalia.

Overall the exhibit is well presented and displayed given the space available. However, because of the relatively small area devoted to this exhibit, it is rather overwhelming. I found it hard to appreciate individual pieces as they deserved, particularly when viewing an entire large cloth, since there was always some other object right there in my peripheral vision. It was also disappointing to have all the fabrics hung against walls so that only one side could be viewed. The lighting, particularly of the textiles themselves, is harsh from the relatively dim ambient lighting in combination with spotlights directed on the fabrics themselves. As stated earlier, while the average viewer will find enough information provided on the textiles themselves, the true textile

enthusiast (a limited audience to be sure) is left wanting much more information about the cloths themselves.

Kente Cloth Examined

Kente cloth is woven on relatively primitive looms with two, four, or occasionally six heddles, in pairs, for controlling the patterns. A loom with two heddles can only weave a plain weave fabric, known as ahwepan, where each weft goes over and under alternating warp threads. If two additional heddles are added, the warp threads can be grouped into bundles of six threads (or occasionally two, four, or eight threads), expanding the pattern possibilities and allowing for the weaving of topreko and faprenu cloths. In rare cases, a loom may add a third pair of heddles, in which case the highly complex cloth known as asasia can be produced.

Kente is woven in narrow strips, generally three to four inches wide, which are then cut apart and sewn together, selvage to selvage, to produce the typical six to seven-foot wide cloth. Many kente cloths are composed of fabric woven on a single warp which has been cut and sewn, while other cloths (referred to as Mmaban or "mixed") may contain strips from two, three, or even more warps with different stripe patterns that are then sewn together in a regular order. The strips may be sewn together by hand using a simple whipstitch, or machine sewn with a zigzag stitch. While the machine-sewn kente

is more common today for practical reasons, even now hand-sewn cloth is generally still regarded as much higher in quality.

Kente is generally woven of a cellulose-based fiber such as cotton or rayon, or for more luxurious and expensive fabrics, silk. Wool and other animal fibers are rarely, if ever, used -- no surprise given the fabric's origination in the hot sub-Saharan climate. The threads were formerly handspun, a time and labor-intensive process, and dyed with available natural dyes that limited the colors that were available to the kente weaver. Now, however, most kente weavers purchase commercially prepared thread which, because of the much expanded range of colors available from fiber-reactive dyes, gives the kente weaver a much wider and brighter palette of colors with which to work than in the past. Bright golds, greens, reds, and blues, along with black, are favored. This thread provides, as well, a more evenly spun thread that can minimize breakage problems in the weaving process.

Kente is classified as a warp-emphasis fabric, with the threads on the loom sett at a density (typically nearly 100 threads per inch) that minimizes the effect of the weft threads woven across the warps. Thus, the warp colors predominate in the plain weave sections of the fabric. The warp is generally designed in a stripe pattern, and it is this stripe pattern that almost always gives a particular cloth its name. These names may be names of past royal figures, may be derived from nature, or may come from the many

proverbs of the Akan peoples. They seldom have any actual tie to the characteristics of the pattern itself.

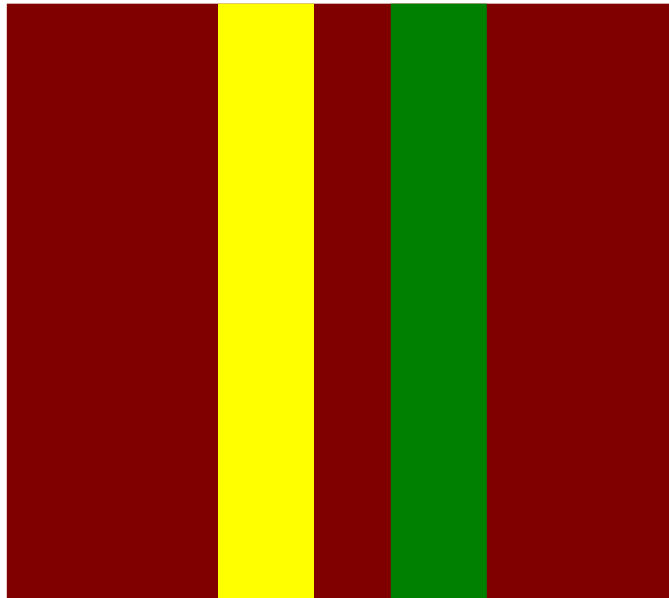
One warp pattern, Sika Futuro ("Gold Dust"), does reflect its actual characteristics (Figure 1). This pattern, a rare solid color warp, is often used as background for the most complex kente weavings.

Figure 1: Sika Futuro warp



The most popular warp stripe pattern is Oyokoman (Figure 2), with wide gold and green stripes on a deep red background. This pattern, and its variations, is the most widely used warp pattern for the most complex kente cloths, the adweneasa and asasia cloths, in which the warp is often completely obscured by the supplementary wefts used for the patterns.

Figure 2: Basic Oyokoman pattern



Other warp stripe patterns do not necessarily have the rigid color restrictions of the Oyokoman, but may instead be set up with any of a number of different colors, particularly for the background. One example of such a stripe pattern is Mmεεda, with groupings of thin red, black, yellow, and white stripes on various colored backgrounds

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Figure 3: Mmεεda pattern on blue background

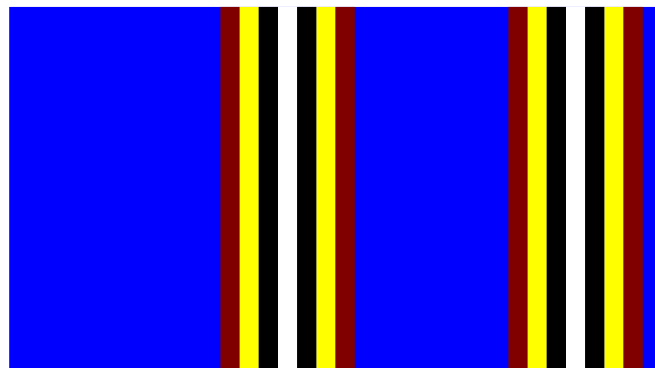


Figure 4: Mmεda pattern on purple background



In still other warp patterns, it is the stripe width and arrangement that is characteristic of the cloth, with the colors varying according to the will of the weaver. Additionally, weft stripes may be added to the design during the weaving process, leading to yet another, sometimes plaid-like, look for the cloth.

Given that kente is a warp-emphasis cloth, the weft color typically chosen for plain weave sections is that of the primary color in the warp. This gives the effect of a purely solid color background in these areas, with the stripes of other colors being toned, but not dramatically changed, by the weft color crossing them.

In a typical kente cloth, areas of plain weave highlighting the warp stripe pattern (ahwepan) alternate with areas of cloth woven with a supplementary weft in a brocade technique. These areas, collectively known as adwen, use multiple strands of the weft

thread together, producing a heavy overlaying design that obscures, if not completely obliterates, the warp stripe pattern in the ground fabric. The less dense areas are known as "topreko," where the supplementary weft is woven alternating with the ground weft. The supplementary weft sits on top of the ground fabric and produces a design, but does not completely cover the ground fabric -- the underlying stripe pattern is still quite visible. More dense areas, "faprenu," use two or three picks of supplementary weft to each pick of ground weft. This leads to very dense weft patterns, where the ground fabric is completely covered by the wefts sitting atop it.

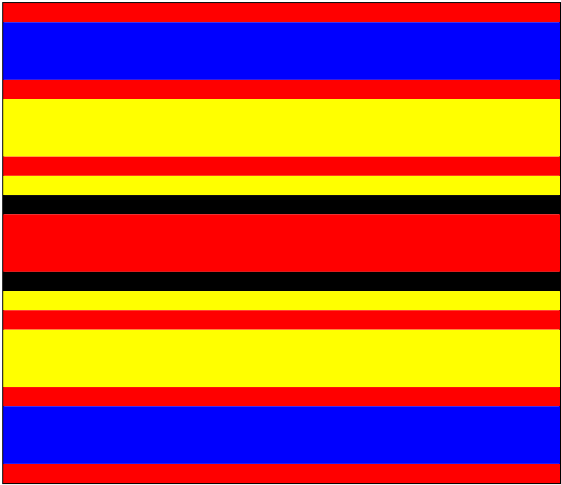
Most weft patterns have specific names, which describe actual objects depicted (stylistically for Asante cloths, more realistically for Ewe cloths) in the pattern. Three designs, Babadua, Wotoa, and Akyɛm, are weft stripe/checkerboard designs that form the building blocks of all other adwen patterns. Unlike the other adwen patterns, these three designs are plain weave with groups of warp threads acting as one, and thus can be woven with shuttles rather than with hand-manipulated wefts. Babadua is composed of weft-faced bands that completely cover the warp threads. Wotoa is always woven as bands, generally four, of red and yellow stripes, separated by small red and yellow checkerboard bands. Akyɛm is similar to Wotoa in the alternation of striped bands with small checkerboard bands, but the colors used are much more varied and the weft is allowed to show through in places. In a typical kente cloth, one of these three blocks would be used to "frame" another adwen pattern, appearing before and after it in a section

of cloth. This is illustrated in Figure 5 below, showing two sections of Babadua framing a section of the adwen pattern Mpaboa (sandals).

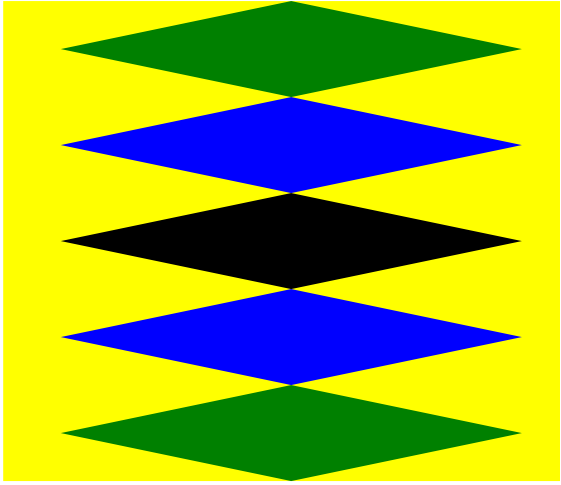
Except in the most intricate of cloths, the adwenasa, these sections of cloth woven would alternate with sections of ahwepan. In adwenasa cloths, every section of the cloth is covered with a design. Thus, the Oyokoman or Sika Futuro warp pattern is completely obscured, except at any fringe at the beginning and end of the cloth, giving a hidden, amulet-like quality to the cloth.

Figure 5: Diagram of a section of adwen, with two sections of Babadua framing one of Mpaboa

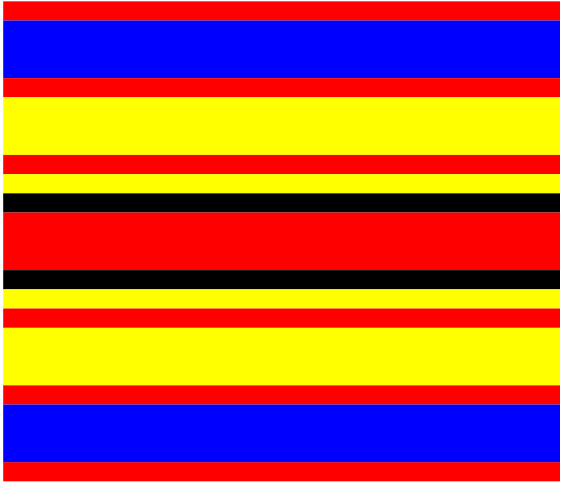
Babadua



Mpaboa



Babadua



Two additional commonly used Asante weft designs are shown below: the pattern variously known as "Fathia Fata Nkruman," "Afoakwa Mpua," and "AkyEmpem" (a thousand shields, Figure 6); and "Puduo" or "Kuduo" (ritual container, Figure 7).

Figure 6: Fathia Fata Nkruman/
Afoakwa Mpua/AkyEmpem weft
pattern

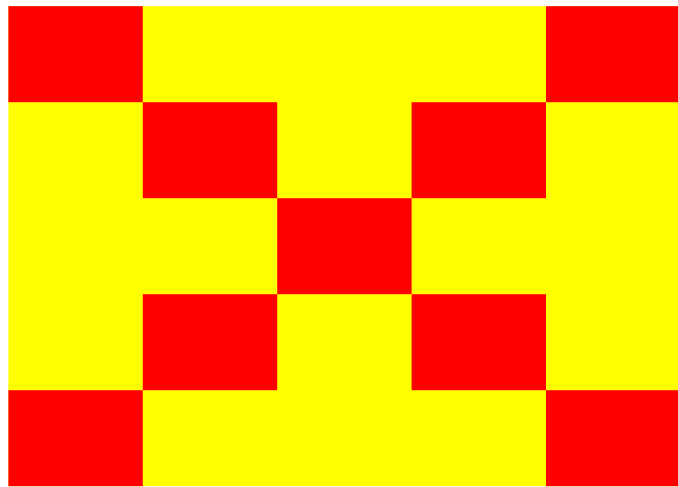
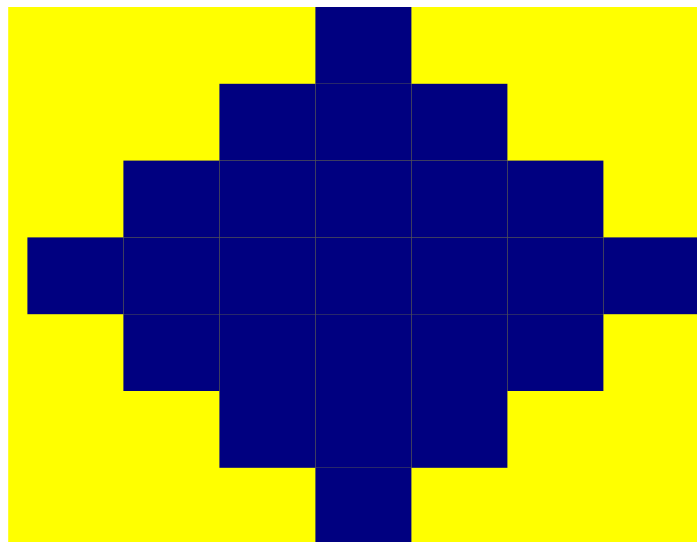


Figure 7: Kuduo/Puduo weft
pattern



Kente cloth is meant to be used, like most textiles. The cloths are worn by both men and women, either as traditionally wrapped garments or made into more Western-style clothing. Simpler cloths are used for everyday wear, while the more colorful and intricate fine textiles appear for ceremonial occasions. When accessorized with ornaments and jewelry, a person wearing kente is a magnificent sight indeed.

Kente Compared with Textiles from Other Cultures

Kente, despite its African origination and unique characteristics, bears a striking resemblance to the backstrap weavings of Guatemala and other areas of Central America. Both areas produce warp-emphasis, plain weave fabrics primarily of bast (cellulose-based) fibers, with warp stripes forming the design foundation and brocading techniques used to overlay supplementary weft threads over the ground fabric, often densely enough to cover the underlying ground cloth. Guatemalan cloth, however, is woven as a much wider fabric, often 20 inches or more across, and uses an ikat or resist-dyeing technique to produce intermittent warp color changes throughout the fabric.

Additionally, brocading techniques such as those used to form the adwen designs in kente are found in the fabrics of Southeast Asia. Textiles from this area often feature brocaded motifs similar to the figurative inlaid designs favored by the Ewe weavers. Birds, animals, and natural objects are universally favored inspirations for designs, it seems.

Thus, while kente occupies a significant place in the culture of western sub-Saharan Africa, it is by no means a purely unique product.

Reference:

Ross, Doran H., et. al. *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*. UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural Identity, Los Angeles.

Note:

Some of the pattern names and technical terms have been Anglicized in their spelling, as the actual characters used in the names are not available in the ANSI character set.