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**The Kanga, A Cloth That Reveals<sup>1</sup>**  
**Co-production of Culture in Africa and the Indian Ocean Region**

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*Photo: Kim Retka*

The kanga, a colorful machine printed cloth, is frequently identified with the Swahili culture along the east African coast starting in the early 1880's. This rather mysterious cloth continues to be used and valued by millions of people in many countries today. The kanga is approximately 45 x 65 inches in size, is usually sold in pairs, and can be identified by its distinctive border and central design or motif. Typically a line of text is printed along the border.

Kangas are found all over the world. Japan, Lamu, the Rift Valley, Nairobi, Dar es Salam, the Comoros islands, Mozambique, eastern DRC, Oman and Dubai are but a few of the locations where kangas have been worn and used for generations. In each place the role of the Kanga is shaped by culture and local use.

The literature on African textiles primarily describes the kanga as a machine printed cloth. Limited research has been undertaken on its production, elements of its design or its social meaning and use. It

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<sup>1</sup> National Museums of Kenya: Department of Cultural Heritage, *The Cloth that Reveals*, exhibition Nairobi, Kenya 2011, the

has not been seen as a particularly valuable cloth. Research on the history has typically been limited to its origins along the Swahili coast of east Africa. While it is known, that the Kanga has been produced in both east Africa and in various countries, the full extent of its production and trade and use is not fully appreciated.

This paper presents a preliminary review of local and global influences that have shaped the design and use of the Kanga, drawn from on-going research. A seminal finding is that the Kanga is a rich collage of influences from cultures around the Indian Ocean, Africa, and Europe.

## **Early Cultural Exchange**

While the Kanga is commonly seen as having a narrow cultural identity, on more careful examination it represents a clear example of co-production in which elements of the design and use are drawn from a global exchange of ideas and trade over centuries. At a broader level, this finding questions assumptions that cultures and people have functioned independently without influence from others and challenges isolation theories of Africa. The kanga reaffirms that cultural life does not take place in a vacuum. Things, ideas, and practices emerge from a broader world of influences. The study of the kanga reveals a dynamic exchange of ideas within the world of African and Indian Ocean trade.

The emergence of the Kanga is best understood as a product of rich cultural exchange over centuries on the east African coast which has been an active partner in the world of the Indian Ocean for more than two millennia, and throughout its history has maintained deep cultural and commercial roots in the African interior.<sup>2</sup> The east African coastal area has been a place where products and ideas were exchanged, and within this trading environment, Africans participated in import, export and trade across Africa.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that very early Indian Ocean trade and cultural exchange was possible primarily because of the pattern of monsoon winds on the sea, known as ‘trade winds’. These winds carried the sailors from east Africa across vast areas of the Indian Ocean in small wooden boats, or Dhowls. The temperate climate and the predictability of the sea enabled the use of small boats. The winds changed direction with the seasons, preventing the sailors from leaving port for up to 6 or 7 months of the year. Remaining in port for an extended period facilitated cultural exchange.<sup>4</sup>

Cloth itself was an important item of cultural exchange in east Africa for centuries. Histories note the local production of cloth as early as 1200 A.D. in Zanj (probably on the Somalia coast). By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries India was exporting products to countries around the Indian Ocean including east Africa.<sup>5</sup> Writings from the 1400’s confirms trade between China and Zanj, a ‘stately African kingdom’, likely on the Somali coast; its emissaries traveled to China where they were treated with honor and lavished with gifts. Africa was engaging with China, and as the east African coastal region became more affluent they were beginning to seek business across the ocean.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sheriff, Abdul. *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean, Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam*. London: Hurst and Company, London Zanzibar Indian Ocean Research Institute, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Horton, Mark. "The Invisible Archaeology of Western Indian Ocean Textiles.

<sup>4</sup> Mack, John. "The Sea a Cultural History." (Reaktion Books) 2011: 178.

<sup>5</sup> Alpers, E. "Gujarat and the trade of East Africa 1500-1800." *The Internatinal Journal of African Historical Studies* (University of African Studies) 9, no. 1 (1976): 22-44.

<sup>6</sup> Snow, Philip. "The Star Raft China's Encounter with Afirca." (Cornell University Press) 1988: 1.

In the 1500s the city of Cambay was the center of cloth production in India and was the most important international trading port of Gujarat<sup>7</sup>; the first clear references to Indian cloth traders in East Africa were reported in the earliest accounts of the Portuguese on the coast of east Africa in the 1500s.<sup>8</sup> The Portuguese also brought cloth to east Africa in the 1500s. In the same period east African coastal towns were described as highly prosperous; their harbors were busy with foreign ships, and their own ships were sailing the western Indian Ocean.<sup>9 10</sup> Cloth carried high value as an item of prestige.

## The Kanga

By the early 1800's various types of cloth were available on the east African coast. The cloth included locally produced light cloth; Merikini, an unbleached calico cloth traded from the US; Kaniki, a block printed and dyed indigo cloth from India; Omani cloth; and the Visutu or handkerchief like cloth that the Portuguese brought in bolts to the east African coast. The exact origins of the Kanga remain uncertain.

A commonly accepted story about the creation of the kanga credits its origins to the east African coast, likely Zanzibar island or Mombasa port, where fashionable women reportedly desired colorful cloths and creatively sewed together six handkerchief-like squares to form lengths of cloth which could be worn as a body and head covering.<sup>11</sup>

Some writers suggest that the use of the Kanga emerged out of a culture of elite slave women accompanying traders on the caravan routes, and newly freed women, who had not had access to colorful cloth, established their power and identity by the choice of the Kanga. These new fashions made Zanzibar the 'Paris of the east'. Lady Jane Moir, in 1891, one of the first British women to travel to Ujiji along Lake Tanganika, describes the colorful cloths worn by women accompanying Arab slave traders.<sup>12 13</sup>

Zanzibar was a crossroads for trade with the interior of Africa and across the Indian Ocean. Local merchants - Swahili, Arab and Indian -- identified markets for the colorful cloth. As the African market for cloth increased, links strengthened between cotton producers in India and the US and the industrial production centers in Europe, primarily Manchester, Leichester in England, the Netherlands, France and Switzerland. Each found the kanga a desirable cloth to print and trade on the coast. Early Kanga designs were block printed. By the late 1800's Kanga's were machine printed in Europe and India using designs created both locally and internationally.

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<sup>7</sup> Alpers, E. "Gujarat and the trade of East Africa 1500-1800." *The Internatinal Journal of African Historical Studies* (University of African Studies) 9, no. 1 (1976): 22-44.

<sup>8</sup> Sheriff, Abdul. *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean, Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam*. London: Hurst and Company, London Zanzibar Indian Ocean Research Institute, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Snow, Philip. "The Star Raft China's Encounter with Afirca." (Cornell University Press) 1988: 1.

<sup>10</sup> Mack, John. "The Sea a Cultural History." (Reaktion Books) 2011: 178.

<sup>11</sup> New, C. "Life Wanderings and Labours in Eastern Africa." (Frank Cass & Co. LTD.) 1971.

<sup>12</sup> McCurdy, S. "Fashioning Sexuality: Desire, Manyeme Ethnicity and the Creation of the kanga 1880-1900." *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 441.

<sup>13</sup> Moir, Jane F. *A Lady's Letters from Central Africa*. Edited by T.M. Lindsay. Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1891.

Unique contributions to the Kanga were made by peoples in each of the countries which produced, traded or used it. It is an adaptable cloth but also a cloth which documented trends, ideas, influences, and historical events in its image and text over 150 years of its production.

### **Design As Co-production**

Analysis of elements of the Kanga design most dramatically reveal the extent of the co-production of this textile, the rich extent to which it has assimilated cultural symbols from all over the world.

The unique design features of the Kanga give it distinction. While the basic form has remained for nearly 150 years, the specific elements of the design are dynamic and continually changing with the weekly production of new designs. Each Kanga is distinct but typically includes one or more of a select group of symbols that have come to define the Kanga—e.g. dots, the cashew or mango shape, stripes, circles, symbols for protection, fruit and flowers.

Many of the symbols used in the Kanga have roots in European, African or Indian Ocean culture. This was confirmed both through interviews with designers of Kangas and reviews of the sketch and sample books compiled by the printing houses of Europe. The symbols on Kangas can be found in 18<sup>th</sup> century English wallpaper books, French tapestries, ancient Persian carpets and African ceremonial garments or objects. They can be found in woven cloth from the Middle East, as shapes of local fruits and flowers, and as ancient Indian tie dye designs. All masterfully woven into a mix of color and life.

Trends are primarily reflected in the image in the center of the Kanga. Very early Kangas had more uniform designs. In the early part of the last century, hand drawn images were used depicting fashion trends, political figures, global events. More recent designs are developed with computers but the basic elements of the Kanga design remain.

The concept of cloth with messages has been in existence for a very long time; messages are not unique to the Kanga. However, the text messages on the Kanga carry unique cultural meanings for the many different groups using the Kanga. Arabic script was used on the Kanga in the late 1800s, Swahili was introduced around the turn of the century, and at times English. Kanga text is often poetic with layers of cultural meaning.



Below are examples of diverse cultural contributions commonly incorporated in core elements of Kanga design.



*Composite of elements of the kanga design Photo: Pat Augsburger.*

**Persian and Kashmiri, Scottish, Indian, African influence**

It is often said that a kanga is not a kanga without the Persian/Kashmiri boteh or Scottish paisley design. This symbol is said to have been borrowed from 17th century floral and tree of life designs in Mughal textiles. Kashmiri shawls also incorporate the symbol, as do shawls woven in Paisley, Scotland in the 18th century. In India the same symbol is called the mango design and is a fertility symbol <sup>14</sup> In Africa it is seen as a cashew shape and represents wealth and fertility. The cashew symbol forms an integral part of conceptions of the kanga; for some people a kanga without a cashew nut is not a real kanga.<sup>15</sup>

After the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya, the kanga, below on the right, with the cashew nut pattern was shared among friends in some communities to express hope for peace and hope for their prosperity. The edge of this kanga uses the cross and the circle as symbols for protection.



*Photos: Kim Retka*

<sup>14</sup> Hatanaka, K. *Textile Arts of India*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Nyamangaa, O.P. "Kanga, Its History and Symbolism." 2009.

## Indian Sari Influence

One of the earliest kangas, the kisutu, is still used for weddings in Lamu and other parts of Kenya. It has a sari like design with wide borders on either end and a small patterns in the center panel. The kisutu does not include text and originally was black with red and white patterns. It includes a red cross said to be mirrored red cross vans which collected sick people during cholera epidemics in Zanzibar. In Lamu the colors of the Kanga are significant for weddings; red indicates the brides virginity; black the pain of de-flowering; white the color of the male seed which she will receive for the first time. In some communities a kisutu is given at birth to wrap the new born baby.<sup>16</sup>



*Photo: Kim Retka*

## Indonesian Batik/Persian Influence

Indonesian batik also influenced early kanga design, through designers at Dutch fabric printing companies one of the largest, Vlisco, printed batiks for the Indonesian market and kangas for the east African market during the same time period.<sup>17</sup>



*Photo: Phyllis Ressler*

<sup>16</sup> Ressler, research Kanga Stories, National Museums of Kenya 2009-2011

<sup>17</sup> Vlisco museum, interview with R. Saunders 2011



## Rajesthan Influence

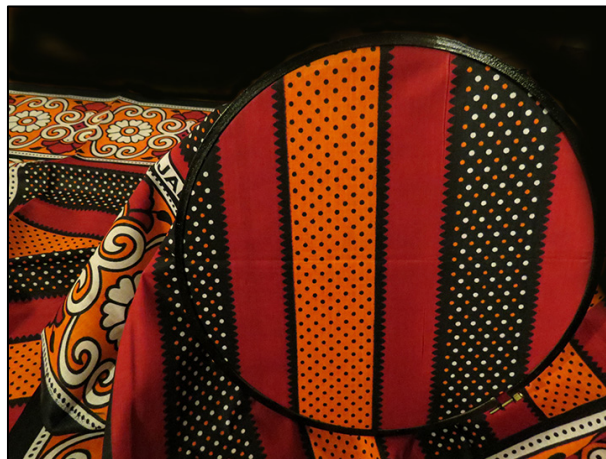
Tie dye designs are a very early part of the kanga. This pattern draws from the Indian Rajasthani resist dye technique, called *Bandhani*. It was one of the earliest dyeing techniques used throughout the sub-continent but primarily in Rajasthan. By some accounts the Kanga name was taken from these spots which resemble the Guinea fowl, or Kanga bird in Swahili, and which are nearly always found in kanga designs.<sup>18</sup>



*Photo: Phyllis Ressler*

## Omani Influence

The striped kangas are reminiscent of Omani striped cloth. Its original popularity with Omani traders contributed to its export to Zanzibar, and later was used as a model for kangas design. The original cloth is prized for its mixture of silk and cotton woven in colorful striped patterns usually in reds and golden yellows.<sup>19</sup>



*Photo: Phyllis Ressler*

<sup>18</sup> Hatanaka, K. *Textile Arts of India*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Fee, Sarah, *Muscat Cloth, the trade in southern Arabian textiles to east Africa*



## African Influence

African symbols and designs are included in Kangas. For example, the kanga which incorporates the Siwa horn symbol is used in a man's ceremonial dance on the east African coast.



*Photo: Phyllis Ressler*

## Conclusion

The Kanga is a marvelous example of co-production; as described by Anna Tsing,<sup>20</sup> human culture has been shaped and transformed through long histories of regional to global networks of power, trade and meaning. The kanga as an east African item of culture has documented stories of African exchange, Indian Ocean trade and European expansion for generations. In addition, it continues to shape identity and to hold stories of meaning among communities and individuals in countries around the globe. The Kanga is a rich collage of influences. Because it continues to be produced, worn and sold in markets from Kinshasa to France, its dynamic qualities are on-going - a dynamic example of cultural co-production.

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<sup>20</sup> Tsing, Anna, *Friction, An Ethnography of Global Connections*, Princeton University Press, 2005