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The Twenty-first Century Voices of the Ashanti Adinkra and Kente Cloths of Ghana¹

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For centuries, narrow bands of fabric have been joined along the selvages to form large squares and rectangles. These strip cloths, as they are called, have been and still are produced in a variety of styles and sizes in many parts of Africa. The Ashanti² of Ghana are especially known for two types: printed Adinkra and woven Kente. This paper looks at their production and the political messages communicated by the colors, symbols, and how they are worn. It is common to see Ashantes in western-styled clothing, but wear Adinkra or Kente during ceremonial events. Men wrap Adinkra or Kente around their bodies, leaving one of their shoulders exposed³, while women wear smaller versions of head, upper torso, and lower body wraps.



Figure 1. The Boakye family produces Adinkra cloth in Ntonso (located northeast of the Ashanti capital of Kumasi). The panels of this black cloth were hand embroidered together by local specialists, then Nana Yaw and his son, Gabriel, folded, then stretched and secured the cloth over foam-covered boards. Nana Yaw is in the process of dividing the panels into rectangular sections with a wooden tool (resembling a comb) loaded with Adinkra aduro medium (from the metal pot), while Gabriel uses medium-loaded calabash stamps to print the same image into each section. Gabriel's son hands stamps to his father and learns the family trade by carefully observing every step. Photo by Carol Ventura, Ntonso, Ghana, 2009.

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Richmond Ackam of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi for inviting me to Ghana to work with his PhD Painting and Sculpture candidates in 2008 and 2009 and for introducing me to the vibrant culture of this unique West African country. Dr. Ackam's assistance in and out of the field and the support of Tennessee Technological University made my research possible.

² Ashanti is also spelled Ashante and Asante.

³ Right handed men leave their right shoulder exposed; left-handed men usually reveal their left shoulder instead.

Adinkra

Adinkra⁴, means “farewell,” and Adinkra cloth was originally only worn during funeral ceremonies. Black designs were stamped onto black or russet colored fabric because they were the colors used for mourning (Figure 1). After dividing the cloth into sections, each area was filled in with a motif that indicated a specific trait of the deceased⁵.

The earlier Adinkra stamps were made from cassava tuber. Today the stamps are made from calabash rinds. The images hand carved into the surface of the calabash are inspired by proverbs and philosophical concepts that are depicted in the abstracted forms of animals, plants, and celestial bodies. In earlier times Adinkra and the images stamped onto the cloth were the exclusive property of the Asantehene (King of the Ashantes). Today Adinkra symbols are not only used all over Ghana in a variety of media (Figure 2), but have also been appropriated by people around the world⁶.



Figure 2. Ashanti wax models of Except God⁷ (held in hands), Rams Horns⁸, and Bravery⁹ being prepared for lost wax casting¹⁰ in Krofofrom. Photo by Carol Ventura, Ghana, 2009.

⁴ The Ashanti went to war with the Gyaman people of the Ivory Coast after their leader, Kofi Adinkra, made a copy of the Ashanti's "Golden Stool". After winning the war, the Ashanti brought back the Gyaman stool and captive craftsmen. For more about Adinkra and interpretation of the motifs, see Antubam 1968, Arthur 2001, Fosu 2009, Kwadwo 2002, and Willis 1998.

⁵ See my web page at <http://www.carolventura.com/Adinkra.htm> for more information about how Adinkra is produced.

⁶ See Boateng 2011 and Ross 1998 for a closer look at how Adinkra and Kente patterns and cloth have been appropriated and commercialized.

⁷ *Gye Nyame* (pronounced jeh N-yah-mee) symbolizes the omnipotent and immortal nature of God. No one alive today saw the beginning of creation and no one will live to see its end, *Except God* (Arthur 2001: 128 and Willis 1998: 114-115).

⁸ *Dwennimmen* (pronounced djwen-nee-menn) symbolizes strength and humility because the ram is strong but only uses his horns when needed (Arthur 2001: 144 and Willis 1998: 96-97).

⁹ *Gyawu Atiko* (pronounced jah-woo ah-tee-koo) symbolizes fearlessness. It was the hairstyle of a brave military leader (Arthur 2001: 147 and Willis 1998: 112-113).

¹⁰ See my web page at <http://www.carolventura.com/LostWaxCasting.htm> for more about Ashanti metal casting.

Adinkra is constantly adapting to economic conditions and fashion trends. Early Adinkra cloth panels were embroidered together by hand. This expensive time consuming method is still used today. Stamped Adinkra cloth is not washable, so some people prefer machine printed Adinkra that is either embroidered in the traditional manner, or sewn together by machine. The seams can be invisible (Figure 3) or embellished with faux embroidered strips (Figure 4).



Figure 3. A sewing machine was used to join six yards of machine woven fabric to make this rectangular man-sized cloth with invisible seams. A smaller woman’s wrap would only have required four yards. Ordinarily, a few stamps that commemorate a special occasion or convey a specific message are utilized, but a larger variety of images were chosen for the cloth I commissioned. Anthony Boakye finishes stamping it with the same Adinkra King¹¹ concentric circles used to begin the cloth (in the lower left hand corner of the photo). Photo by Carol Ventura, Ntonso, Ghana, 2008.

¹¹ Three concentric circles form the very first motif, *Adinkrahene* (pronounced ah-dink-kra-hen-nee) which signifies the universe and its creator and symbolizes leadership (Arthur 2001: 142 and Willis 1998: 62-63). The *Adinkra King* motif is seen on an Adinkra cloth with embroidered seams owned by Osei Tutu Agyeman Prempeh II (the Asantehene from 1931-1970) on exhibit in the Jubilee Museum at the Kumasi Cultural Centre.

Screen-printing is a recent Adinkra innovation (Figure 5). The screens are produced photographically, so design possibilities have been expanded. While some of the images are appropriated from traditional Adinkra symbols, others are inspired by contemporary events. Consumers have many choices today. They may wear stamped, screened, or commercially printed Adinkra cloth that was put together by hand or with a sewing machine; bright colors for happy occasions, and red and black during funerals¹².



Figures 4 & 5. Bands woven on a Kente loom in Ntonso enhance the seams of this screen-printed Adinkra cloth, which includes traditional Asambo (elegance), Uac Nkanea (prosperity), Sankofa (wisdom), motifs (Arthur 2001: 159, 179, 181). Water-based fabric paint is printed onto the cloth through a stencil adhered to a screen, while bands are being woven on Kente looms in the background.

Photos by Carol Ventura, Ghana, 2009.

Kente

Kente is composed of narrow strips of hand woven cloth sewn together to form a rectangle. Kente is double sided because the design is woven into the cloth¹³. Earlier ones were not supposed to be washed but dyes are more colorfast now, so modern Kente is washable. The colorful geometric motifs are named and communicate messages to those who are able to read them¹⁴. Kente is also worn on ceremonial and festive occasions. It may identify a person's place of origin and their status. Colors communicate wealth (gold), vitality (yellow), renewal (green), and spiritual purity (blue)¹⁵. Until recently, only Ashanti men wove on strip looms in Bonwire and Adawomase. Today, however, a few women have begun to weave

¹² Black is worn by mourners; members of the family of the deceased wear both red and black during the funeral. For the very elderly, the funeral attire is usually commercially printed white cloth or western styled dress with black motifs or Adinkra printed on white cloth as seen in Figure 3.

¹³ Weavers in Ghana refer to fabric with supplementary weft as being double woven.

¹⁴ For more about Kente and their motifs, see Adler and Barnard 1992, Antubam 1968, Asamoah-Yaw 1999, Fosu 2009, Kwadwo 2002, Lamb 1975, and Ross 1998.

¹⁵ Salm and Falola 2002: 117-118.

Kente¹⁶. Since the woven strip must often be long enough to produce an entire six-foot by twelve-foot Kente cloth, a 150-yard long warp is not unusual. The warp is bundled, then tied to a weighted drag sled (Figure 6)¹⁷.



Figure 6. Weaving Kente strips on a front porch in Adawomase (located northeast of Kumasi). Photo by Carol Ventura, Ghana, 2009.

Pulleys and cords support paired sets of string heddles on the portable loom. Each set has a disk hanging on the bottom, which is slid between the weaver's largest two toes. The weaver pulls down with one foot at a time to open the appropriate shed (Figure 7) for inserting either the ground weft or the supplementary pattern weft. Some weavers use one paired set of string heddles, others use two (one pair for the pattern and the other for the ground). Instead of selecting the appropriate pattern warps with the fingers, some weavers utilize string heddles instead (Figure 8).

¹⁶ I observed a young woman weaving Kente strips in Adawomase, Ghana in 2009. For more discussion about gender roles in Kente and Adinkra production, see Boateng 2011 and Ross 1998.

¹⁷ See my web page at <http://www.carolventura.com/KenteAdawomase.htm> for more about Kente weaving in Adawomase and for Bonwire see my web page at <http://www.carolventura.com/Kente.htm>.



Figure 7. Nana Kyere Badu weaves on his porch in Bonwire, which is down the road from Adawomase. Red, yellow and green are the same hues featured on the Ghanaian flag. Carved wooden pulleys and cords support four sets of heddles; one pair for weaving the plain ground cloth, the other for weaving the weft-faced pattern. A cord and disk are attached to the bottom of each set. His feet move back and forth from pair to pair, inserting the disks between his toes, pulling down on them as needed to open the appropriate sheds. Photo by Carol Ventura, Ghana, 2009.

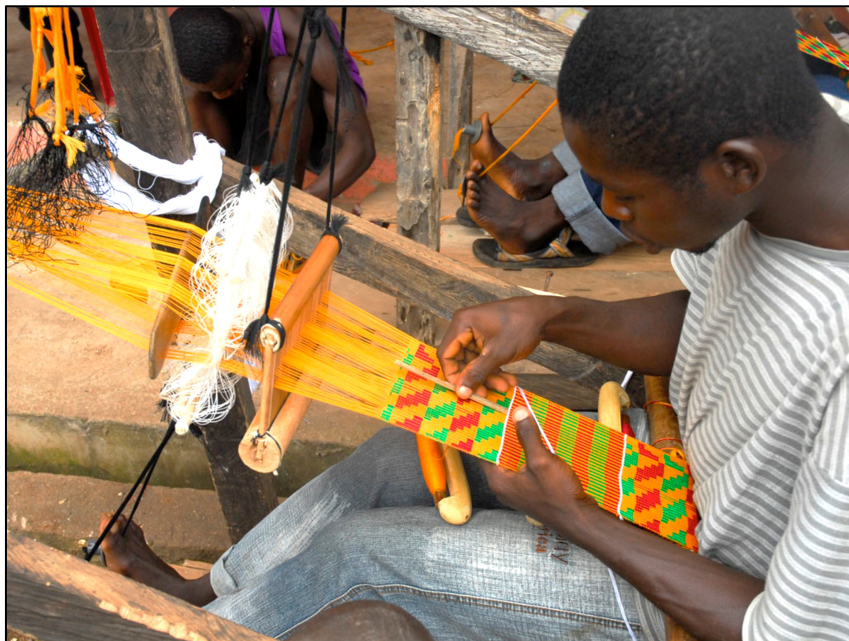


Figure 8. This weaver uses black string pattern heddles to create the pattern sheds and two sets of white string heddles for the plain cloth ground sheds. He operates the white heddles with his feet and raises the pattern heddles with his hand. A sword keeps the shed open. He is measuring the height of the pattern block with a notched cane. Photo by Carol Ventura, Adawomase, Ghana, 2009.

A notched cane is used to measure the height and proportions of the pattern blocks (Figure 8), which must be correctly sized and proportioned for accurate placement next to neighboring strips on the finished Kente cloth. After the entire strip has been woven, it is cut apart, the pattern blocks are accurately lined up in checkerboard fashion, then the seams are zigzagged together on a sewing machine.

Akwasidae¹⁸

The Ashanti honor their ancestors and the Asantehene¹⁹ during the Akwasidae, which occurs every six weeks on Sunday at the Manhyia Palace in Kumasi²⁰. In the public portion of the ceremony, the Asantehene receives gifts from his chiefs and other guests (Figure 9). Otumfuo Osei Tutu II²¹ has been the Asantehene since 1999. Previously, only the royal family could use gold colored Kente. As with Adinkra, certain motifs were also reserved for him and his court. Today, however, all colors and motifs are available to everyone. However, no respectable Ashanti wears a cloth like that of the Asantehene in his presence. Sometimes an assistant tells the Asantehene what others are wearing to ensure that he selects the most elegant attire for the event. It is expected that the Asantehene has the best collection of Kente and Adinkra in the world, from which to choose.



Figure 9. The Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II is seated on his throne (back center), while others prepare to speak to him. Several men on the right are waiting to present the Asantehene with gifts. Another man is adjusting his wrap and has not yet removed his sandals.

¹⁸ For more about the Akwasidae, see Yankah 2009.

¹⁹ For more about the Asantehene, the symbolism of his regalia, and the duties of his entourage, see *Official etc.* 2009.

²⁰ This is one of the most exciting events I have ever attended. Seeing court regalia and clothing in action and feeling the energy of the pounding drums, singers, and dancers, made it quite an emotional experience.

²¹ For more about the Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II and the Akwasidae, see Yankah 2009.

The first Kente were dark blue and white. Formerly, only black and white were worn by those in attendance at the Akwasidae, but today guests often dress in colorful attire. The Adinkra and Kente cloths of the participants communicate through the symbolism of their decoration and the manner in which they are worn. For instance, lower station men uncover both shoulders, while higher ranks reveal only one shoulder²². It is also customary to remove one's sandals²³ before approaching someone of higher rank. With that in mind, let us listen to what is being communicated.

The man with the talismans around his head and shoulders in Figure 10 is wearing an Adinkra with colorful embroidered seams. Each white strip is printed in black with the same motif; *Enclosed Compound House*²⁴ alternates with *An Altar of God*²⁵. The talismans, colors, and symbols suggest he is a religious figure that respects tradition.



Figure 10. Dignitaries parade to their seats at the Akwasidae. Photo by Carol Ventura, Kumasi, Ghana, 2009.

Adinkra and Kente are expensive, so it should not be surprising that commercially printed yardage (some of which mimic them) is widely available. This affordable cloth is worn wrapped around the body in the traditional manner and is also tailored into dresses and shirts. The commercially printed commemorative cloth of the courtier in Figure 11 features the Asantehene's portrait, the *Except God* Adinkra image, and the *State Ceremonial Swords*²⁶, a depiction of the sword he holds. This type of

²² In 2008, Osei Kwadwo told me that the manner in which the cloth is worn indicates one's position in court hierarchy.

²³ The sandals are called *Ahenemma* or *Kyeakyaw*. They are the appropriate footwear for wearing Adinkra and Kente (Nketia 1999: 3).

²⁴ *Fi-Hankra* (pronounced fee-han-krah) depicts a traditional house with an open patio surrounded by a room on each of the four sides (Arthur 2011: 164 and Willis 1998: 106-107).

²⁵ *Nyame Dua* (pronounced n-yah-may doo-ah) is a symbol of God's presence and protection, brotherhood, and security (Arthur 2001: 313 and Willis 1998: 158-159).

²⁶ The *Akofena* (pronounced ah-ko-fe-nah) motif symbolizes state authority, legitimacy, gallantry, and power. These ceremonial swords are used to swear the oath of office and allegiance to a higher authority. They are carried by royal messengers, ambassadors, and sword-bearers on special occasions and are used in purifying rituals (Arthur 2001:141 and Willis 1998: 68-69).

curved sword is used when a chief is enstooled, so it symbolizes authority, appropriate for a cloth commemorating the five-year anniversary of the reign of the Asantehene Osei Tutu II.

The man on the far right in Figure 12 is wearing fabulous gold jewelry and a very colorful woven wrap with powerful appliquéd Adinkra symbols. His demeanor, jewelry, and contemporary-styled wrap suggest he is a high-ranking person. The key holders behind him wear cloths that commemorate the ten-year anniversary of the reign of the Asantehene. The way the cloths are bundled in front with both shoulders exposed, and the fact that the men are barefoot are typical of the style worn by courtiers during official functions²⁷.



Figures 11 & 12. Detail of a courtier at the Akwasidae wearing a commemorative cloth and holding a sword. Courtiers and dignitaries parade to their seats at the Akwasidae. Photos by Carol Ventura, Kumasi, Ghana, 2009.

The man in Figure 13 that is wearing a screen-printed Adinkra with *Akofena State Ceremonial Swords*, *Adinkrahene* concentric circles, and other geometric symbols, is followed by a gentleman wearing a machine printed cloth that commemorates the Tenth Anniversary of the coronation of the Asantehene.

Horns are blown by courtiers (wearing machine-printed commemorative cloths) to announce the arrival of the Asantehene²⁸ in Figure 14. They are followed by a man wearing a cloth printed with *Two Animals Share one Stomach* and *Be Careful of Deceit*²⁹ Adinkra symbols. Kente and Adinkra are worn over shorts, which can be seen on the young musician (next to the black and red carried drum) who is casually wearing a smaller cloth, with two ends tied behind his neck reflecting his position as an official assistant.

²⁷ This style is called *Ntoma Kwaha* (Nketia 1999: 30-31). The steel, silver, and gold keys are called *Nsafoa*. They indicate that all doors are shut and locked while the Asantehene is attending the Akwasidae. (Official etc. 2009: 20).

²⁸ (Official etc. 2009: 20).

²⁹ *Kramo Bone Amma Yeannhu Kramo Pa*, which translates to “The fake Muslim makes it difficult for a good one to be recognized” (Arthur 2001: 182 and Willis 1998: 120-121).



Figures 13 & 14. Dignitaries and courtiers leading the procession of the Asantehene at the Akwasidae. Photos by Carol Ventura, Kumasi, Ghana, 2009.

Throughout the event, drummers, singers, and dancers perform for the Asantehene and the attendees. The female performers in Figure 15 are dressed in the traditional manner with a head wrap³⁰ and an upper body cloth³¹ that partially covers another cloth wrapped around the lower torso³².

People of many different ranks greet one another during the festive Akwasidae, dropping their wrap from their shoulder when appropriate (Figure 16).



Figures 15 & 16. Performers parade to their seats at the Akwasidae. A dignitary wearing machine printed cloth greets a man of higher rank dressed in Kente. Photos by Carol Ventura, Kumasi, Ghana, 2009.

³⁰ This type of head cloth, known as a *Duku*, may be worn by all women.

³¹ The cloth wrapped around the upper torso is called *Akatasuo Ntoma*, which translates to “top cover cloth”.

³² A *Fem Ntoma*, which translates to “lower cover cloth,” is wrapped around the lower torso.

After everyone had spoken to the Asantehene, he stood up and walked towards his most distinguished guest, former President of Ghana, John Agyekum Kufuor, who presided between 2001 and 2009. President Kufuor applauded the Asantehene with hand gestures (Figure 17), then adjusted his Adinkra cloth to uncover both shoulders in order to engage the Asantehene in a dance (Figure 18). You would think that the former President of Ghana would not humble himself to the Asantehene, a local King, but President Kufuor is an Ashanti who reveres his heritage, his people, and the Asantehene.



Figures 17 & 18. President Kufuor (in the center wearing a screen printed Adinkra with colorful hand embroidered seams) applauds the Asantehene, then bows to him while dancing. Photos by Carol Ventura, Kumasi, Ghana, 2009.

As the Akwasidae came to a successful close, everyone was very happy, having bonded while honoring their ancestors. During this event, Adinkra and Kente spoke loud and clear to those who could hear their voices. Adinkra and Kente are wonderful metaphors for the Ashanti, who identify strongly with being part of something larger than themselves. Just as each strip contributes to the creation of a magnificent cloth, every person is an important participant in the fabric of their family, ethnic group, religious community, nation, and world.

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