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NEW

DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,
Creating the Future.

Adinkra and Kente Cloth in History, Law, and Life

Boatema Boateng

ABSTRACT

Adinkra and kente cloth have changed significantly in the course of their history first as markers of Asante royal power and then of Ghanaian cultural distinction. Once handmade and reserved for the exclusive use of the Asante ruler, cheap mass-produced reproductions now proliferate in Ghanaian markets. In attempting to use intellectual property law to regulate their appropriation, the Ghanaian state has set the conditions for further changes in these fabrics, their designs, and their sources of authority. This paper examines the implications of changing political and regulatory contexts for the past present and future meanings of adinkra and kente cloth for the people who produce and use them.

Introduction

Adinkra and kente are fabrics produced by the Asante people of Ghana, and there is much that one could say about them from a purely technical perspective in terms of the kinds of fiber, fabric, dyes, and stencils used in their construction. But adinkra and kente are much more than textiles produced in a specific location using certain methods and materials. They have moved through generations of history – a history that has changed their features and composition and seen an array of competing and contested claims around them, sometimes buttressed by custom and law. They also move through the lives of ordinary people marking rites of passage, like marriage and death, and telling stories about wealth, prestige, and kinship ties. In this essay, I explore adinkra and kente and their layers of meaning as they come to life in these histories. I begin with the stories they tell in my own and my family's lives and then move outward to their significance in history and law.

Life

Although I own a women's set of kente cloth, I have never worn a full kente outfit. There has not yet been an occasion in my life important enough to justify it. As I once told a group of graduate students, it is my Oscar de la Renta – the equivalent of red carpet attire – and there are very few red carpets in my line of work. I am a minority among the women in my family in never having worn kente clothing. My mother possesses a stunning red kente outfit that she wore to formal dinners and receptions earlier in her life. She routinely loaned a second one to two of my sisters when they attended a girls' boarding school where kente was required wear for annual prize-giving ceremonies. A third sister owns a kente ensemble that she wears to weddings and other special events. I do have a few kente stoles that I throw over my shoulder on special occasions though it is challenging to wear them in the U.S. where, all too often, my Ghanaian clothing turns me from a person into a colorful and exotic living artifact. Therefore, between limited red carpet opportunities and the risk of exotic objectification kente, for me, is less wardrobe item and more treasure that I will leave to the younger women in my family when I die. Cloth is, after all, an important way that Ghanaian women accumulate and pass on wealth.

For mundane occasions I could wear the relatively cheap roller-printed imitation kente that has proliferated in Ghana for several decades, but I have a strong aversion to it even though, at a distance, some imitation kente is almost indistinguishable from the handwoven kind. It has gained wide acceptance in Ghana, and where initially there seemed to be a strong distinction made in the two kinds of kente and the uses to which they could be put, that seems to be eroding and more people seem to wear

imitation kente as readily to church as to the office. Here again, there is a difference between me and at least one member of my family. Like me, my youngest sister ranks handwoven cloth above the mass-produced versions. However, she is willing to wear the imitations – just not to special events – and she has tried to persuade me to do the same. Women like my sister, who can afford both handwoven and imitation kente, appear to maintain the distinction between events where you should wear only handmade cloth and those where the imitation will do. Imitation kente has also found a market in the African Diaspora, and I will come to this a little later.

Then there is adinkra – another distinctive fabric that also emerged in Asante as a royal monopoly and around which the same restrictions continue when it comes to cloth worn in the presence of the Asantehene. While kente is distinctive for its rich color palette and its association with wealth and celebration, adinkra is important for mourning. The words “di nkra” in the Akan language mean to take one’s leave, and adinkra is worn when a person takes her leave of this world and passes into the world of the ancestors (Arthur). In addition to its importance for this final rite of passage, adinkra cloth is noted for the symbols used in its production and the distinctive meanings associated with each one. Like kente, mass-produced imitations of adinkra cloth are common. They are also cheaper than the original hand-stenciled cloth and a widely-accepted alternative for funeral wear.

The most well-known adinkra symbol is *gye Nyame* which has come to symbolize the power of God. Another that is very important among African Americans is *sankofa*, a symbol that is found not only in adinkra but also in the equally distinctive Akan medium of carved wooden linguists’ staffs. The sankofa symbol features a bird with its head turned around to look over its back and symbolizes returning to retrieve what has been forgotten – the basis of its appeal in Black America. For me, the significance of adinkra occurs at different levels. I started my professional life as an artist working with text and images and, in that context, adinkra was an additional set of expressive symbols that I could use in my work. For a long time, that was its strongest value for me – much less than its significance as mourning attire. This is perhaps because unlike kente, no-one in my family wears adinkra.

In my research cloth makers told me that although adinkra is important for funerals, it is not worn during the most intense periods of mourning. During those periods, the required cloth is black or red ochre. Traditionally, these are dyed by women, who continue to produce the black cloth called kuntunkuni. In addition to its use for deep mourning, kuntunkuni is also used in conducting business at the Asantehene’s palace. While it is the adinkra cloth made by men that attracts most attention outside Asante society, the cloth that women make is perhaps more important in being set apart for these more somber uses. My family’s funeral attire choices reflect this distinction, and we wear black for deep mourning especially when a close relative dies. Where the connection is less strong, the palette can range from black to light brown. In the case of the death of a very young or very old person, it can even be white. For such funerals that do not require solid black cloth, we wear cotton prints that may include imitation adinkra.

These differing uses of handmade and imitation adinkra and kente tell us something about the importance of cloth as a material object among some Ghanaian ethnic groups. As I mentioned earlier, cloth is a means of storing and transferring wealth and women, in particular, will purchase good quality cloth as an investment and not necessarily to add to their wardrobe. Such cloth may be stored unsewn for years and passed on to a woman’s heirs if she does not use it during her lifetime. Kente is the ultimate form of cloth as wealth. Its value is not easily separated from its material form as handwoven

cloth, and its cultural and social distinctiveness make it a strong investment. Adinkra does not hold wealth to the same extent, and its symbols retain their significance even when separated from their primary medium of cloth, as can be seen in the use of sankofa by African American communities, and Ghanaian artists' conversion of adinkra into a range of media including jewelry. For me, my mother and sisters, it makes better economic sense to invest in kente and even in good quality wax prints than in adinkra.¹

In working on this paper, I came across yet another group of people who give life to fabrics like adinkra and kente, and those are bloggers. This is a very preliminary discovery for me and my observations about it are equally preliminary. However, it is an important site that bears further and deeper study. For now, I want to look at kente as it appears in the blogs of two young women, one who gives her name as Francisca or Chesca, and another who goes by Amma Mama. They appear to be women of Ghanaian descent from the generation after my sisters and me. They are therefore in the vanguard of changing tastes and patterns of consumption around adinkra and, especially, kente. Both women appear to be based in North America, but still have connections with Ghana.

As historian Emmanuel Akyeampong informs us there are several African diasporas, and these women appear to be members of a newer diaspora that is different from the other diaspora I discuss here (Akyeampong, 2000). That African diaspora is an older one whose presence in the U.S., and other parts of the Atlantic Basin, was mediated by the transatlantic slave trade. That difference is an important one for many reasons including the fact that for the bloggers, the connection between their new locations and their homes in Ghana has not been forcibly severed as it was during slavery, and as a result they have the advantage of being able to maintain and navigate that connection in new and interesting ways. One of the ways they do so is through clothing and style.

In the posts I looked at, I focused on what the two bloggers had to say about kente, and both pointed to the fact that in being cheaper and washable, the imitations democratize kente and bring it within the reach of those who might not be able to afford handwoven cloth. Francisca says,

There is a huge difference between authentic and faux kente. My outfit below is made of authentic kente. This is the only authentic one I own because they are usually very expensive. I took this from my moms closet... The rest of my kente are all faux. They are lighter and easier to clean. The authentic ones, because [woven] are a little heavier and have a rough finish rather than a smooth one. Kinda like tweed (Alamodewearhouse, 2012).

Amma Mama describes the difference in similar terms and also speaks of the price difference when she states, "The woven Kente cloth is NOT cheap. In order to get a woven Kente cloth that is big enough to make an entire outfit, it costs about \$300-\$500 {if not more}." She also says, of the printed imitation kente, that it is "much cheaper and lighter than the woven Kente cloth. Woven Kente cloth is thicker and heavily threaded. My mom bought my printed cloth from the market for about \$20.00-\$25.00 for six yards" (Amma Mama, 2014).

¹ See Domowitz (1992) and Yankah (1995), on the naming of wax prints as a means of symbolic expression for women in West African nations like Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Better quality cloth also serves as an important economic commodity.

Bloggers like Francisca and Amma Mama are evidence of another site of practices around woven and printed kente, and that is the Internet. They come up in a simple search of Google images using terms like “kente blogs,” “kente fashions,” and “kente clothing.” Such searches reveal an abundance of blogposts and websites from fashionistas like Francisca and Amma Mama and also from designers and society magazines and other kinds of popular culture. Amma Mama’s website alone provides a wealth of images of the range of contexts in which kente is worn as well as people who have worn kente, from Bill and Hillary Clinton and Bill Gates through Michael Jackson to Halle Berry.

In adinkra and kente’s association with Asante power and royalty; in the meanings and value that they hold for Ghanaians like me, my mother and sisters; in their meanings for Africans in different diasporas; in the imitations that erode their distinctiveness as social, cultural, and economic objects; and in the responses of the Ghanaian state to both the originals and the imitations, we can trace rich and interrelated histories of political power, cultural identity, and law. I will now turn to an exploration of these histories – starting first with power and culture, moving to law, and then finally considering what untold stories might be in store for adinkra and kente.

Power and Culture

The Asante state was established at the beginning of the 18th century and at its peak controlled the trade routes from the capital, Kumasi, to the Atlantic Ocean in the south, and the bend of the Niger River in the north (Wilks, 1975). Artisans who worked in cloth, wood, brass and gold were drawn to the seat of power, and were rewarded with a system of royal patronage that added distinction to their art while linking that art to Asante even when it did not originate in Asante. As a result, even though there are strip weaving traditions among other ethnic groups in Ghana, none have the same association with indigenous political power that Asante adinkra and kente enjoy.

Kente was very strongly associated with the Asante ruler, or Asantehene, who figures in narratives of origin as its chief patron. According to oral narratives, when the cloth was first produced only the Asantehene could wear it. In my research, cloth weavers told me that those restrictions were relaxed as lesser rulers sought and obtained permission to wear the cloth. They also noted, of contemporary times, that in a market economy no one could prevent any upstart from purchasing and wearing the best cloth. However, they also reported that people of lesser rank could still be sanctioned for wearing the same cloth as the Asantehene in his presence. They said that those who are savvy know to attend royal events with an extra cloth of a different design, and change into that if their first choice of cloth is identical or similar to what the Asantehene is wearing.

Asante’s power waned in the second half of the 19th century and it was eventually defeated by the British. Despite that subjugation and its incorporation first into the British colony of the Gold Coast and then into the independent nation of Ghana, Asante remains a force to be reckoned with. Leaders of the independence struggle against Britain recognized that they could not hope for success without the support of indigenous rulers and the Asantehene was the most important of those rulers (Rathbone, 2000). Modern Ghana therefore has both Western and indigenous systems of governance. Where Asante once exercised extensive military, political and economic control over the territory, it now holds significant cultural power and considerable political influence.

Since 1957 the modern nation-state of Ghana has been the political power in control of the former British colony of Gold Coast, including the remains of the Asante federation. Unlike Asante, the basis of the Ghanaian state's power over the territory rests less in military and economic might than in its recognition by its neighbors and the larger world community as a sovereign state and a modern nation. Like all such nations, Ghana has created a narrative of its origins and culture as a nationalist rallying point (Coakley, 2012). In doing so it has deployed culture in ways similar to the Asante state. Nationalist leaders used culture as a unifying strategy in the anticolonial struggle and after independence. In both periods Ghanaian leaders wore local clothing and assigned it the same social value as Western formal attire.

Post-independence photographs of those leaders often showed them wearing kente. During that period, the invitations to state functions that arrived at my parents' home gave the dress code as "evening dress or traditional attire." Kente and other elements of indigenous culture thus became important weapons in the symbolic struggle against the legacy of a colonial Europe that had tried to instill into the Asante and other inhabitants of the territories it dominated, that there was nothing of value in their cultures. This nationalist validation of local culture was an incredible gift to Ghanaians like me who grew up with no question in our minds that we could be as chic in kente as in Chanel or Oscar de la Renta, and could wear our "national" dress anywhere with dignity and with pride. It should be noted that this equivalence between Ghanaian and Western clothing is gendered, and functions more strongly for women than for men.²

A similar cultural struggle was waged in the U.S. by the descendants of enslaved Africans. One of the mechanisms used to control slaves was the forbidding of practices associated with the African peoples from whom they were taken. Prime among these were language and religion, but clothing was another site of cultural erasure as slaves were stripped of their African clothing and made to wear crude Western clothing. They often defied this in wearing clothes associated with those above their station in life or in ways that flouted convention (White & White, 1998). African Americans used clothing to underscore both their human dignity and their equality with White society – especially after the end of slavery.

According to Maxine Leeds Craig, for African Americans, dress was a way to ward off the threat that their value might be threatened when they "stepped out into a society dominated by whites" (2013, 26). She adds, "Wearing clothes that expressed self-care was a way to demand the respect that could not be taken for granted" (2013, 26). Craig identifies this as part of the idea of "race uplift" in which African Americans were expected to "attend to [their] appearance for the collective good of the race" (2013, 26). Although this use of clothing has a long history in the community, it came to national attention during the 1960s in the wardrobe choices of civil rights leaders.

Also in the 1960s, during the same period that African nationalist leaders were restoring value to their culture, radical Black nationalists sought to assert their cultural distinctiveness and pride in the face of White cultural hegemony in the U.S. The Black Panthers adopted black leather jackets, which were icons of rebellious masculinity. Some radical Black nationalists and younger African American leaders

² A common shorthand term for such clothing in Ghana is "cloth" (see Boateng, 2011). Men's cloth is worn in one large piece draped around the body and requires constant adjustment. In addition, its length and bulk impede rapid motion. Women's cloth is worn in ways that do not impose these limitations on ease and speed of movement. It also requires considerably less fabric and is therefore less costly. As a result, women are more likely than men to wear cloth for everyday use while men reserve it for important social occasions.

also chose “Black Pride” over “race uplift” and turned to Africa in their hairstyles and clothing choices. Maulana Karenga, who formed the cultural nationalist organization, US, was influential in consolidating this into a set of distinctive cultural practices – especially with his institution of the festival of Kwanzaa (Brown, 2003).

The mid-20th century Black nationalist restoration of value to the cultural artifacts and practices of Africa, has been important in creating a market in the U.S. for cultural goods like adinkra and kente. Craig describes the mid-century popularity Africa-inspired style as having “waned to such a degree that they have become humorous evidence of a bygone era” (2013: 31). The work of Doran Ross (1998) and Kyra Hicks (2003) and my own research (2004) suggest otherwise, and while the Afrocentric clothing of the mid-century “Black Pride” era is less in use, there continues to be a demand for African fabric and accessories. African American quilters are an especially important source of demand for fabrics like adinkra and kente as well as Malian *bogolanfini* (Hicks, 2003).

However, as we learn in Ross’s *Wrapped in Pride* (1998), it cannot be assumed that a demand for the culture of Africa necessarily translates into an insistence on products made by African artisans. As a result, the African American market is open not just to the most authentic products, but also to the most easily available and in the case of African textiles, those are often imitations. In her essay in *Wrapped in Pride*, Betsy Quick contrasts Ghanaians’ view of kente as a sacred and special cloth to African Americans view of the same fabric as “anything you want it to be” (1998:252). At the same time, a historical view shows that in some ways, “anything you want it to be” has been as true of kente in Asante and Ghana as in Black America. On both sides of the Atlantic, the cloth has been harnessed to projects of cultural distinction and nationalism and its meanings shaped as much by political figures as by the consumption practices of ordinary people.

Law

In being used for projects of Asante, Ghanaian and African American cultural nationalism, adinkra and kente have also been subject to different kinds of tacit and overt regulation. I have previously noted the early reservation of these fabrics for the Asantehene’s use. Some scholars have compared this to copyright law, and although less formally constituted than modern copyright law, the restrictions around the use of adinkra and kente by ordinary people underscored their status as exclusive objects and the Asantehene’s stature as one who exercised control over such objects. More to the point, those restrictions operated, as copyright law does, to discourage unauthorized copying and use (Kuruk, 1999).

In modern Ghana, the nationalist and post-independence appropriation of adinkra, kente, and other objects and practices as elements of national culture has occurred through a combination of policy and law. These include the dress code on the formal invitations mentioned earlier; nationalist leaders’ practice of wearing kente and other indigenous clothing on key occasions; and the incorporation of local cultural elements into state insignia. A number of intellectual property laws have also been passed that, like the old restrictions on the king’s cloth, determine who can use adinkra and kente designs in cloth and other forms. The first of these was a law passed in 1973 that made it possible for local fabric designers and producers to protect their designs from appropriation. A clause in the law excluded the design of indigenous fabrics like adinkra and kente from ownership claims by those registering cloth designs (Government of Ghana, 1973).

In contrast to the negative protection of the textile designs law, a revised copyright law passed in 1985 actively protected Ghanaian “folklore” including adinkra and kente designs (Government of Ghana, 1985). That protection was retained when the law was revised again in 2005 (Government of Ghana, 2005). The language of folklore used in this law must be placed in the wider global context of struggles to protect the knowledge and culture of indigenous peoples in “settler democracies” like Australia, Canada and the U.S., and in local communities in third world nations. These struggles found a home in UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) and also in WIPO (the World Intellectual Property Organization), and in 1982 the two organizations jointly drew up Model Provisions for National Laws on Protection of Expressions of Folklore Against Illicit Exploitation and Other Prejudicial Actions. Ghana’s 1985 protection of folklore was influenced by these international developments.

The treatment of adinkra and kente designs in Ghana’s copyright law has important implications for the next phase in the history of these fabrics, the communities who make them, and the relation between designs and the socially valuable commodity of cloth. This is because authorship works differently in copyright law and in the production of adinkra and kente cloth (Boateng, 2011). Rather than attempting to reconcile this difference in ways that reflect the conditions of these fabrics’ production, the Ghanaian law applies standard authorship principles to their designs that only allow for cloth makers to claim authorship of individual designs as individual authors. Contrast this with the communities where the designs are produced where the separation is not as absolute between individual cloth producers’ designs either in time or in space. From systems of authorship that combine individual design with collective use, the law sets the conditions for a system that, in emphasizing individual authorship, is likely to pit cloth makers more strongly against each other as creators of individual cloth designs.

In addition, following another basic principle of copyright law, protection is limited to the *expression* of the designs regardless of the medium in which they are expressed. As I have noted earlier, it is when bound up with the medium of cloth that these fabrics have their greatest social value – especially in the case of kente. Imitation kente fabrics that can be worn to social events and therefore undermine indigenous cloth production cannot be equated with kente-patterned gift-wrapping paper, say. Yet copyright law, by its very nature, cannot take such differences into account.

In granting protection to individual creators rather than the communities that have historically produced these fabrics, Ghana’s copyright law runs the risk of fragmenting the norms of fabric production in which individual creativity is balanced with communal use and community histories that provide an important source of the fabrics’ distinctiveness. Similarly, in treating appropriations in all forms as equivalent, there is the risk of fragmenting the link between designs and fabric while over-policing forms of appropriation that do not compete with adinkra and kente and, at the same time, failing to sufficiently sanction those forms that do compete with these fabrics and with the livelihoods of those who produce them.

There is one area of intellectual property law that has the potential for protecting products in their entirety, and that is geographical indications. Although these laws were originally devised in Europe to protect food product like wine and cheese from specific geographical regions, third world nations and indigenous peoples have looked to geographical indications as a potential means of protecting their culture. In 2003 Ghana passed its first geographical indications law and specifically mentioned kente as a protected name (Government of Ghana, 2003). However, it did not do the same for adinkra and it is

clear that the law is something of an experiment. In addition, in its use of both geographical indications and copyright laws, Ghana's protection of adinkra and kente and other forms of local culture remains unrecognized in the wider international regulatory context and this poses a major challenge to nations like Ghana and also to indigenous peoples around the world.

This lack of international recognition introduces another dimension into the legal history of adinkra and kente fabric, their designs, and their imitation. These fabrics are not confined to the lives and history of Ghana and its people, but circulate as global commodities. While imitations are made in Ghana and other African nations, they are also produced in a number of Asian nations – most notably, China, which has undermined local textile production in different parts of the world (Boateng 2011). One commentator has noted that Chinese textile imports, for example, have undermined the power of the “Mama Benzes” who are famous for controlling cloth markets in Benin (Prag, 2013). Given the power of women in similar markets in other West African nations, including Ghana, we can be certain that the same is true in these other locations. The lack of international recognition of indigenous and local culture as worthy of intellectual property protection leaves them open to this kind of appropriation and the undermining of both local markets and producers. Adinkra makers informed me that they had gone from using fabric mass-produced in Ghanaian textile factories to cotton imported from China. A local textile factory manager also informed me that the factory's production of a version of broadloom kente had been undercut by China to the point where they only produced it on demand.

The status of adinkra and kente in the international intellectual property regulatory framework ensures their status, along with countless other forms of local and indigenous knowledge, as raw material fit only for exploitation – usually by persons and entities from outside these communities. It ensures the continued subordination and control of the labor of Third and Fourth World peoples. Historically, people in both worlds have seen their land and natural resources taken or controlled or exploited and the same has been true of their labor, with the cross-Atlantic slave trade serving as the most notorious example. Today, it is the knowledge of culture of the Third and Fourth World that is being taken – this time not at the point of a gun, but through the law and the ways in which it defines some kinds of knowledge and culture as worthy of protection and others as not.

Unfortunately, even though its intellectual property protection must be seen as an act of defiance in the face of this trend, Ghana protects adinkra and kente in ways that make the state rather than cloth producers the owner of these and other forms of local culture where the original designers are unknown. If international intellectual property regimes give adinkra and kente the status of raw material, Ghanaian copyright law nationalizes them with little regard for the communities in which they originate and only grants claims to members of those communities who can prove that they are the creators of individual designs. Given the mistrust of the state that cloth producers shared with me, a flood of such claims seems unlikely. While this ensures that community norms rather than IP law continue to shape the production of adinkra and kente, it also cedes the ground to the state in using the law to claim them as Ghanaian rather than Asante cultural products.

In the meantime, adinkra and kente continue as markers of grief, celebration, and wealth in the lives of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. Unfazed by the flood of appropriations, weavers continue to produce kente for those Ghanaians who can afford it. Fifteen years ago, in the kente-weaving capital of Bonwire, I saw little imitation kente knick-knacks in one weaver's store sitting above the glass display case containing woven cloth. While he thoroughly disapproved of the imitations, his response

was not to avoid them completely but to recognize that he was selling to a varied market that included those people who would focus on the glass case and ignore the fake kente, as well as those who, unable to afford anything in the case, would content themselves with a fake kente coin purse. I discovered the top tier of this segmented market when I asked to see samples of his best cloth and found that these lay behind a locked door.

Throughout the history of adinkra and kente there have been global shifts that have left their marks on cloth production. When European traders introduced silk fabrics to the area, weavers simply unraveled them and used the yarns in their weaving and so introduced the rich color palette that we now associate with kente cloth. Similarly, adinkra makers went from handwoven to mass-produced cotton fabric to make their distinctive cloth when industrialized production methods made handwoven cloth less viable. In addition, if mass-produced cloth has decreased demand for hand-stenciled adinkra, Ghana's exploitation of cloth production centers as sources of tourist revenue ensures a level of continued demand for their cloth. For more than a century, cloth makers have adapted their production methods to the impacts of a changing global economy. While the scale of current shifts is unprecedented, and the global regulatory context inimical to their interests, I am hopeful that they will navigate these changes as skillfully as they have handled previous challenges.

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