2018

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Wanduara, Mercy V.W., "Looking at the Past and Current Status of Kenya's clothing and textiles" (2018). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1118.
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

**Textile Society of America 16th Biennial Symposium
Vancouver, Canada — September 19-23, 2018**

Published in *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings 2018*

Presented at Vancouver, BC, Canada; September 19 – 23, 2018

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Looking at the Past and Current Status of Kenya's clothing and textiles

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Abstract

This paper analyzes and documents traditional textiles and clothing of the Kenyan people before and after independence in 1963. The paper is based on desk top research and face to face interviews from senior Kenyan citizens who are familiar with Kenyan traditions. An analysis of some of the available Kenya's indigenous textile fiber plants is made and from which a textile craft basket is made. Kenya's textile and clothing industry has undergone tremendous changes from pre-colonial era (before 1963) to date. Traditionally Kenyans donned clothing made out locally available materials; namely plants and animal skin. Color for these materials was also naturally obtained from plants and animal and other organic and inorganic substances such as mud and animal dung. Since the textile materials were scarce, the clothing was scantily and only served the purpose for covering supposed nudity. Only sections of the lower torso were covered for both men and women after puberty. Children (before puberty) were unclothed because the weather is warm enough (Kenya is on the equator). Babies and toddlers were strapped on the backs of older siblings or their mothers using slings made out of leather or other suitable fibrous materials such as banana fibers. After colonialization of the Kenyan colony by the British and introduction of Christianity among the Kenyan people, the traditional textiles ceased as the "western" clothing replaced the indigenous ones and suddenly "nudity" became an issue to deal with. For the purpose of commercialization, textiles industries were introduced by the British and Indian traders from which cloth was factory made for export and from cotton grown by the local farmers and machinery from England and India and the cloth was mainly. The indigenous textile materials were slowly forgotten as the exotic materials (specifically cotton) took root. After the introduction of the factory made cloth, the traditional "clothing" manufacture also ceased existence. In time and with the advent of trade liberalization in the early 1990s, these "new" textile factories have since closed down and importation of new and second hand textiles and clothing have taken over. Kenyan currently relies heavily on imported new and second hand textiles and clothing from the east and west. Further research seeks to explore ways in which the traditional industry could be rejuvenated to bring forth the rich cultural heritage of the Kenyan people.

Key words; Indigenous textiles, traditional clothing, eco-friendly

History of the Textile and Garment Industry in Kenyan

According to Donovan¹, the first documented information on trade in textiles along the Kenyan coast was in AD110 by Greeks. However, trade by Arabs and Persians was evident even before the Greeks arrived in Kenya. Evidence of using a loom in Africa dates back to the 11th century in Mauritania.² Archaeological findings have unearthed woven pieces dating back to the 9th century in West Africa. Literature indicates that the Greeks, Arabs, Indians and later Europeans brought in the early textile technology to Kenya. These technologies have developed from basic hand operated ones (for example, hand spinning, weaving and dyeing) to highly mechanized engines in use today.

Most of the hand tools used in the earliest beginning required manual power and the craft skills are still being practiced by some of the Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs). Natural fibers from animals and plants were woven with looms into narrow strips which were then sewn together to make cloth. These fibers were often dyed using vegetable and animal dyes. Two of the most popular dyeing techniques were tie dye and resist dyeing by use of dye resist such as candle wax, producing thread-like patterns on the material. Commonly used dyes were the indigo plant because of its deep blues and cola nuts or redwood trees for their reddish brown hues.

The hand techniques of fabric decoration are still popular in Kenya today among the micro and small scale clothing enterprises, and some of which are still pre-dominant among these MSEs. Most dye substances used currently are synthetic in nature; the use of traditional (organic) dye substances is less due to the unavailability and sustainability of these natural substances in the city and other parts of the country since some of the natural dye producing plants are no longer available due to overuse of agricultural and forested areas occasioned by overpopulation. There is however some remnants of natural dyes and traditional dyeing techniques still in use in some part of Kenya. For instance the handicraft makers of the popular Kenyan basket “ciondo” using natural dyes and the Maasai community who utilize red ochre earth for basketry among other uses.

Fibre Sources

Before 1900, (when the Kenya-Uganda railway line was built), the people of East Africa-Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania wore hides and skins decorated with ostrich feathers and beads, as well as bark cloth from the agricultural communities of Uganda.³ According to Gillow⁴ the people of northern Kenya used hides and skins for cloaks, aprons and baby carriers because they were livestock herders. The hides were tanned and then adorned with cowry shells, glass beads, faceted leather or aluminum (made from Indian cooking pots) beads (figure 1). Cotton predominated as a raw material, even though other materials were of great significance.⁵ Bast fibers were produced from plants such as flax (linen), hemp, different kinds of palm (e.g. raffia)

¹ Donovan Alan, "Out of Africa, a Tapestry of Traditional Textiles," *The East African Magazine* (2011).

² Ibid.

³ John Gillow, *African Textiles: Colour and Creativity Across a Continent*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William Gervase Clarence-Smith, "Locally Produced Textiles on the Indian Ocean Periphery 1500-1850: East Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia," Paper presented at the 8th Global Economic History Network Conference, Pune, Dec. 2005.

and banana (e.g. abaca), ramie, the bark of some trees, pineapple and sisal plants. Kapok was used for quilting. Where pastoralism thrived, hair from sheep, goats, camels, and yaks was used. It could be either spun and woven, or felted. Additionally, hides, skins and furs were at times substituted for cloth.⁶ Donovan⁷ further notes that Kenya has a rich diversity of textiles that date back to centuries, whereby Africans wore cloth as fine as silk, from spiders' webs or intricately patterned cloth from mud dyes. However most of the traditional industries have since disappeared.

*Figure 1: Tanned Adorned Hide/Skin*⁸

Cloth/Fabric

East Africans (in which Kenya belongs) are most familiar with the kanga (a piece of rectangular shaped cloth used as a woman's dress. It is always in pairs, one piece for the upper torso and another for the skirt) as demonstrated on figure 2. The kanga arrived on the east coast of Africa only in the 15th century, with the advent of Portuguese sailors who used them as handkerchiefs, which they traded with the Swahili people at the coast. Swahili women sewed the pieces of cloth together to drape around themselves.⁹

The information available in literature indicates that in the late 19th century, African women sewed brightly colored handkerchiefs (imported from Portugal) called lessos into larger pieces of fabrics, which became known as kangas.¹⁰ In Kenya today, the terms "lessos" and "Kangas" (also spelt as kanga), are used synonymously. Kangas became symbolic to African women as emancipated clothing after the abolition of slavery in Zanzibar. Kangas are worn widely in East Africa, specifically in Kenya and Tanzania. They can be worn as headscarves or wrapped around the waist as a skirt, or a protective shawl for the mothers' infants. Kanga is basically a pure

⁶ Clarence-Smith, "Locally Produced Textiles."

⁷ Alan, "Out of Africa."

⁸ P.R. Anawalt, *The Worldwide History of Dress*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

cotton textile fabric made into a rectangle measuring approximately 1.5 meters by 1 meter. It is made and sold as a conjoined rectangular pair of cloth which must be cut and hemmed to form two pieces, most commonly worn in tandem as a skirt and head covering. Kangas are characterized by a border on each side of the cloth and the inclusion of text printed in a narrow box in the bottom third of the fabric (figure 2). The text, which may include a proverb, insult, flirtation, or political slogan, was printed in Arabic on the earliest kanga of the late nineteenth century. Today it appears most often in Swahili.¹¹

Before Kenya's independence in 1963, kangas were initially imported from Europe and later, India.¹² Historically, hand-printed varieties of the kanga were locally produced in eastern Africa until the late 1960s, while machine-printed versions were produced overseas, first in Europe, then in India and the Far East. After independence, local cloth manufacture expanded from six weaving mills in 1963 to 52 by 1983.¹³ This expansion had economic and political impact for the domestic manufacture of kanga as both a foundation for industrial development and a powerful aesthetic symbol of independent African identity.¹⁴

Although diminishing in production due to the shortage of the cotton fiber from which it is produced, kangas are still produced in textile mills in Tanzania and Kenya as well as being imported from overseas, principally India. They are an ongoing part of the great trading network which has thrived for at least two thousand years between the many peoples of the Indian Ocean coastline. The Kanga has been produced in both East Africa and in various other countries, but the full extent of its production, trade and use is not fully appreciated.¹⁵

¹¹ Mangieri, Tina The Moving Frontier: The Changing Geography of Production in Labour Intensive Industries. "African Cloth, Export Production, and Secondhand Clothing in Kenya." (2006): 301-18.

¹² Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945*, (Ohio University Press, 2001); Chris Spring, Lagat Kiprop, Dr. Gore Charles, and Dr. Arero Hassan, "Kanga and Other Printed Textiles of Eastern and Southern Africa," (2010).

¹³ Tina Mangieri, "African Cloth, Export Production, and Secondhand Clothing in Kenya," *The Moving Frontier: The Changing Geography of Production in Labour Intensive Industries*, 301 (2008), 318.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Figure 2.Lesso/kanga fabric (photo by author)

Traditional Dress

Although there is little documentation on the Kenyan traditional dress, information available indicates that there were different definitions of dress for the different communities of Kenya. For example the Kikuyu dress for both men and women was scanty and mainly covered the lower torso of the body but very ornamental with jewellery such as earrings, bangles, necklaces, anklets and bangles made of copper, silver, wood, bone, feathers and special seeds (figures 3 and 4).¹⁶ Generally the traditional dress for most Kenyan communities was similar.

Figure 3:Traditional Kikuyu People ¹⁷

This traditional dress has since disappeared, save for the massai fabric- ‘shukas’ (shawl). The traditional ‘shuka’ was a leather cloak, while the current one is made of fabric which is draped over the body (figures 10 and 11). This is worn by both men and women, over which there is elaborate ornamentation in the form of jewellery. The ornaments are being revived by the crafts people who comprise a big share of the tourist market in Kenya by making the jewelry for the tourists’ market (commonly referred to as the ‘Maasai markets’). In these markets there is also ethnic wear made by some of the tailoring MSEs. Most of the products in these markets are relatively expensive and are targeted for the tourist market. They make good choices for gifts. The details of the Maasai markets have been omitted because they go beyond the scope of this study.

¹⁶ John Gillow, *African Textiles: Colour and Creativity across a Continent*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003); John Picton, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex*. (London: Lund Humphries, 1999); Leslie W. Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion*, (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

¹⁷ HistoryKe. Kikuyu Women, (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=203954729977074&set=picfp.100010876459167.181874732185074&type=3&theater>

Figure 5: Kikuyu Girls ¹⁸

Kenyan Heritage Textiles

Although they are few in number, there are textile fabrics that are associated with Kenya's textile heritage, some dating back to the 1960s, when textile factories began cloth production. The amounts may be insufficient to fulfil Kenya's textile requirements, but they represent Kenya's heritage. According to Gillow ¹⁹, Kenya and Tanzania did not develop a textile manufacturing industry that could compete with the products of the sub-continent or peninsula, because of their trade links with India and Arabia. However, there are textiles that are associated with Kenya because of their extensive use regardless of their source.

¹⁸ O. Kidula, How not to approach the #MyDressMyChoice conversation, (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.afromum.com/approach-mydressmychoice-conversation/>

¹⁹ Gillow, *African Textiles*.

Figure 7: Kitenge fabrics ²⁰

The Kenyan traditional fabrics can be classified as follows;

- The **kitenge**: this is a cotton flowery designed fabric, which is produced in 40 meter rolls and sold in meters, or yards. The kitenge can be worn as a wrap or tailored into loosely flowing garments for women and currently for men's casual shirts. Local production is low, so the rest of demand is fulfilled by imports from the West African countries; Nigeria, and Ghana. Figure 4 shows rolls of kitenge fabric.
- **Lesso/khanga/kanga**: This is a pair of a rectangular piece of cotton printed cloth worn as a wrap, one piece for the lower and the other for the upper body. It is a woman's dress and can also be used to cover the head. Some of the Khanga/lesso fabric is produced locally and some is imported from India, China and Tanzania.

²⁰ Source: http://www.alibaba.com/product-free/110158662/Cotton_Khanga_Kitenge_fabrics.html

Figure 8: Kanga/Lesso clothing (photo by author)

- Kikoyi:** This is a cotton striped fabric with fringes at the narrow ends, measuring about 1.5 meter by 1 meter as shown in figure 8. It is worn as casual wear in form of a wrap for the lower torso for both men and women (figure 9). The women may wear it on the upper body as well. Most of the kikoyi fabric is locally manufactured with some being imported from India. Some kikoyi are made by hand using hand looms and cotton s by micro-enterprises in different parts of the country, mostly supported by NGOs. The hand woven kikoyi are then made into casual men's shirts, shorts, skirts, dresses and children's clothes (figure 9). However, most of the kikoyi fabric sold and used in Kenya is machine made in the factories. For the handmade kikoyi fringing is done manually. Factory produced kikoyi are woven on looms and spaces between the end and beginning of another kikoyi give rise to the fringing when cut into individual kikoyi. Before packaging the kikoyis are separated and the fringes hang from each narrow end.

Figure 9: The Kikoyi Fabric ²¹

Figure 9: Kikoyi made shirts (photo by author)

- **Maasai “shukas” (shawl):** (They are so named because they are commonly worn by the Maasai community, as mentioned earlier in section 2.1.1). They are factory produced and sold in single pieces in clothing and fabric shops and in open markets throughout the country. The shawls are brightly coloured checked fabric, whose predominant colour is red. Other colours on the “shukas” are blue and orange. They are worn on both upper and lower torso for men and women. The shawl is cut into two pieces. One piece for the lower torso, while the other piece is draped over the shoulders to cover upper body. It is commonly worn by the Maasai community of East Africa, and this is where its name is derived. The maasai community are nomadic livestock herders dominating the dryer parts

²¹ Source: <http://cgi.ebay.co.uk/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?VISuperSize&item=120742438344>

of northern and eastern parts of Kenya and Tanzania. The “shukas” were originally made of cotton, but currently it is common to find cotton/acrylic ones.

Figure 10: Maasai shukas²²

Figure 11: Maasai adorned in shukas²³

- **Tie and dye fabric:** This is also a cotton fabric which is normally manufactured as a plain fabric and then it is manually dyed or printed by crafts people (commonly referred to as “jua kali” artisans) and used as a wrap or made into loosely fitted garments for women and men’s shirts.
- **Bark cloth:** This mainly comes from Uganda, and is gaining prominence on Kenyan catwalks. It is produced from Mituba tree (*Ficus Natalensis*), in Uganda. Being the product of a tree bark, garments made from it are expensive and not affordable. The only practical use of the bark cloth is furnishings in the form of art paintings which are readily available in the Maasai markets. On the catwalks it is made for just that or it is mixed and matched with other fabrics.

The specific heritage materials unique to Kenya, are; the khanga/lesso, the kitenge and the kikoyi fabrics and “kyondo” baskets. From the researcher’s own observation, the different coloured strips in the kikoyi can be associated with Kenya’s different ethnic communities. For example,

²² Source: <http://cgi.ebay.co.uk/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?VISuperSize&item=120742438344>

²³ Source: <http://cgi.ebay.co.uk/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?VISuperSize&item=120742438344>

the bright reds for Maasai, the yellow and orange with Kamba and the earth colours with kikuyu. This association is derived from the ethnic communities' love of these colours which is also associated with their economic activities. The Masaai are animal herders who like blood as part of their meal and ceremonies while the kikuyu are farmers, hence the love of green and brown. The Kambas are gatherers (hunters and bee keepers).

Kyondo (or ciondo in plural): is a hand woven basket from central and eastern Kenya and forms a predominant part of Kenyan crafts. It is made from natural s locally available such as sisal, and other local plant fibers. Sisal is most common because it is still fairly readily available. Kyondo is one of the items widely sold as a tourist craft for Kenyans and foreign tourists as a handbag with varied sizes, designs and colours (figure 12). The colours for dyeing the basket are mainly natural (organic) from plant and other natural substances, for example, black from charcoal of specially burnt wood, red from barks of certain trees, and green from leaves of certain plants.

Figure 12:Ciondo (baskets) photo by author

The current status

Globalization and liberalization of the Kenyan textile and clothing industry has resulted into the closure of many of indigenous industries and in their place are masses of secondhand clothing in all cities and towns within Kenya (figure 13).

Figure 13: Second hand clothes in the market place (photo by author)

Results

This paper documents and illuminates the past and present status of the textiles in Kenya with a view of rejuvenating some of the indigenous textiles fiber materials that may be useful for the future. Through interaction with senior citizens, the following information was garnered

1. There are many indigenous textile plants with good potential for manipulation and use for crafts and other uses. These plants are still available but sparsely used yet they could be exploited as a good source of biodegradable textile materials. Most of these are not currently readily used because of lack of information on their existence. There are numerous such plants but a few examples were analyzed and one of them actually processed to the final craft product to determine its viability. The plants fibers explored are such as banana grasses etc.
2. Even though they are commonly used for making utilitarian products within homes, their commercial production is not yet known and their documentation is scanty. These plants were found to be readily available in many parts of the country which have adequate rainfall.

Indigenous fiber plants

The following plant fibers have been identified as rich sources that are readily used in various parts of Kenya;

Irigu-banana (figure 14) - there are many varieties of bananas ranging from cooking ones to those for fruits. Fresh banana leaves are used as animal feed especially for cows, while the dry leaves and stems are used for making handicrafts, strings and ropes for use around the home. The banana plant has been used since the banana's introduction into Kenya as food and also for

traditional uses around the home. Bananas fibers are currently being processed by a small group of farmers albeit in small scale for possible commercialization in Kirinyaga, central Kenya.

Ithanje- a perennial tall grass growing about 2meters high and is common near rivers. Mainly used for thatching houses (figure 15).

Mukeu-dombeya burgessiae-is normally 5 meter high with white flowers- produces strong bast fibers used for all household uses such as ropes, strings and basketry.

Mugere- hibiscus fuscus- 3 meters high with dark brown hairs on stem and white and pink flowers. leaves densely hairy, triangular with serrated margin. Produces fibers for making traditional granaries.

Mugico- triumfetta macrophylla- densely hairy scrambling shrub with three-lobed leaves and yellow flowers. Produces good soft fibers used for making baskets (figure 16)

Mukwego-bridelia micrantha- this is a huge tree whose bark produces a rich red dye for textiles. The tree is used for timber and firewood. Its leaves are left to rot and fertile the soil.

Figure 14:. Irigu-banana (photo by author)

Figure 14:Ithanje- cyperus immensus (photo by author)

Figure 16: *Mugico- triumfetta macrophylla* photo by author

Processing of *Mugico- triumfetta macrophylla*-

Mature plants were harvested and about 10kg of fiber was obtained. The fiber was processed by one of the seniors and a small basket was made. The entire process took approximately five weeks but was done leisurely. The basket shown in figure 6 was made using raw natural undyed fiber from the *Mugico- triumfetta macrophylla*.

Figure 17: .Basket (kiondo) made from *mugico triumfetta macrophylla* s

Such a basket and similar products are a good indication of the viability of use of the eco-friendly plant textile available in many parts of Kenya.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide valuable information on indigenous textiles and materials that could be revived from various parts of Kenya as eco-friendly sources and additional economic ventures. Additionally, extraction and use of traditionally available textile materials may in the long run eliminate the overdependence and use of second hand clothing that have become an economic and environmental problem for Kenya.

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