



Background for Enrichment and Exploration

Freely adapted with permission from *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity: A Curriculum Resource Unit* by Lyn Avins and Betsy D. Quick. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History

Ghana is located on the southern coast of the great bulge of West Africa and is bounded by Togo, the Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso on the east, west, and north. The country measures 420 miles from south to north and averages 270 miles in width, roughly the size of Great Britain. Ghana can be divided into three environmental zones: a flat coastal plain runs inland for as much as fifty miles and is covered with grass and scrub; a forest zone covers much of southwest Ghana; and the northern savannah covers two-thirds of the country north of the forest. The climate is relatively warm, with an annual mean temperature of 70-83 degrees and relative humidity on the coast of more than 90%.

The great mix of languages and ethnic groups in Ghana point to a complex history. It is generally understood that stone-age humans probably first inhabited Ghana roughly half a million years ago. About 2000-1500 B.C.E., knowledge of agriculture and pottery appears in the archaeological record; iron tools were developed between 500 and 1000 C.E., with technologies such as brass casting and weaving appearing later.

Beginning about 1500, numerous states rose in power, establishing powerful kingdoms, each with centralized authority. The rise of these states was, of course, related to the growth of trade in the southwest, especially in connection with the exploitation of gold resources in the area. European influences began in 1471 with the landing of the Portuguese on the coast. Various European powers exchanged trinkets and luxury goods for gold and slaves.

By the end of the 17th century, a number of smaller states, each with its own chief, joined together to create the powerful Asante Kingdom in the Gold Coast. Through military conquests, the kingdom expanded, until by the end of the 18th century, the Asante controlled many of their Akan neighbors. Their economy was based largely on agriculture (the cultivation of yams, plantains, and maize) and on gold exports to both northern Islamic peoples and Europeans on the coast, in exchange for metalware, cloth, and European weapons.

Early 19th century missions by British envoys Thomas Bowdich and Joseph Dupuis sought to create trade relations with the Asante who exercised control over the interior of the Gold Coast. In 1821 the British government took control of trading forts on the Gold Coast, and in 1844 chiefs in the area signed an agreement with the British that opened the door to colonial rule in the coastal area.

In 1874, the British proclaimed the Gold Coast a colony, and in 1896 many senior officials were exiled by the British, bringing the Asante confederacy to an end. With the partitioning of colonial territories following World War II, Ghana's borders were redefined as they exist today. On March 6, 1957, Ghana regained her independence, the first African nation to do so in the 20th century.

The Making and Design of Kente Cloth

The strip-woven cloth called kente, made by the Asante peoples of Ghana and the Ewe peoples of Ghana and Togo, is the best known of all African textiles. Its renown has spread internationally so that it is now one of the most admired of all fabrics. What began in the former Gold Coast as festive dress for special occasions—worn by men as a kind of toga and by women as upper and lower wrappers—has, over the past 40 years, been transformed into hats, bags, shoes, and many other types of apparel, including jewelry.

Although the term *kente* is popularly used throughout much of the world, its origins are heavily contested. In written records it dates back to at least 1847 when a man's cloth of twenty-seven strips was accessioned into a Danish collection as a “cotton blanket (kintee) from Popo,” an Ewe town in present-day Togo. Significantly, *kente* is not the indigenous word for the cloth in either of the two cultures that produce it.

Venice Lamb suggests that the word *kente* is derived from the Fante word for basket, *kenten*. Since the coastal Fante were not weavers, it is plausible that they would use a word named for a familiar genre (woven baskets) that seemed technologically similar to an unfamiliar one (woven cloth).

Both the Asante and Ewe weave on the horizontal narrow-band treadle (pedal) loom. This is the basic loom type throughout most of West Africa, an area framed on the west and south by the Atlantic Ocean, on the north by the edges of the Sahara Desert, and on the east by the area around the present eastern border of Cameroon—a region of almost two million square miles. Men remain the primary weavers of kente, although a few women are known for their weaving skills. Children as young as five assist in the weaving process, particularly in the unwinding of skeins of thread and winding of bobbins.

The weaving process involves four distinct series of tasks: the threads must be wound off skeins and laid out in whatever color pattern is desired for the strip, the loom is threaded with the prepared warp threads, a sufficient length of kente is woven for the desired finished cloth, and the narrow strips are sewn together lengthwise to complete the process. It is a painstaking process—a 24-strip double weave man's cloth may require four days to ‘warp the loom’ and four months to weave the strips.

Most strips are identified by their warp-stripe pattern. The majority of cloths consist of identical strips generally woven on a single long warp; thus, the cloth takes its name from the warp stripe of its strips. Less common, but not unusual, are cloths made up of two or more different warp patterns. These are typically called Mmaban, defined by Lamb as “mixed” or “there are many.”

The names given to Asante kente are richly varied. Because they are primarily tied to striped patterns, however, it is rare to find any correlation between name and pattern. Many cloths are named after important chiefs or queen mothers, and some of these are connected with important historical events. Others take their names from the plant or animal kingdom or from other natural phenomena. The enormous corpus of proverbs that are used to explain the meaning of most Akan art forms also figure prominently in the naming of cloths.

Unlike warp patterns, most weft designs are named after objects, for example, Sekan (knife), Afa (bellows), and Afe (comb). Weft designs are rarely named after individuals or proverbs, although, if pressed, most weavers could quote an appropriate proverb for a given object or design.

Some Asante kente cloths feature a single weft motif (*adwen*) repeated throughout, but more commonly a cloth will incorporate a number of designs. The most extensive use of *adwen* occurs in a cloth identified as Adweneasa, and these cloths are characterized by weft designs inserted into every available block of plain weave. Adweneasa is typically translated as “my skill is exhausted” or “my ideas are finished.”

In kente...

- the cloth is composed of several narrow strips sewn together lengthwise;
- the individual strips often show a vertically-striped pattern of colors, and these striped patterns vary from cloth to cloth;
- the striped pattern sections often alternate with motif sections so densely woven that they sometimes completely conceal the vertical stripe pattern;
- the geometric motifs within those sections may be repeated and/or varied to create a vast array of chevrons, checkerboards and other shapes;
- as the weaver sews the strips together lengthwise, s/he carefully aligns the designs to create an overall diagonal, checkerboard or perhaps random effect.

The Pan-African Movement and Kente in the United States

Over the course of the 20th century, kente has moved far beyond the borders of Ghana. The brightly patterned cloth has come to convey a powerful message of African unity and its influence has spread across the Atlantic. In the last several decades, it has become one of the most popular symbols of African American identity. On both sides of the ocean, then, kente is recognized as a proclamation of a proud association with the rich heritage of the African continent.

The global spread of kente and its transformation into a potent symbol were preceded by the emergence of the Pan African Movement in the early 20th century. Its aim was to unify Africans and African Americans in their struggles for enhanced social and political power. Throughout Africa, people began to rise up against their colonizers in a quest for political independence and freedom. At the same time in the United States, African Americans sought expanded rights and organized to make their voices heard. The Pan African Movement gave both Africans and African Americans an ideological basis for their respective struggles.



A series of Pan African Congresses held between 1901 and 1945 brought together important Black leaders, such as the African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), and Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), an African of Akan origins who would later become the first president of the newly independent nation of Ghana. In the United States, the movement was further fueled by the development of a number of important organizations, the most famous of these being the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), established in 1909, and still an active force in the Civil Rights movement. Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey also inspired many African Americans with the establishment of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1920. This organization promoted Garvey's philosophy of "Africa for the Africans" and supported his "Back to Africa" movement.

Within the context of the Pan African Movement, African and African American leaders established suitable symbols to represent their beliefs. Marcus Garvey articulated a visual language for those who identified with Africa by announcing that red, black, and green—symbolizing blood, skin color, and new life, respectively—officially represented "the colors of the Negro Race." Kwame Nkrumah, following in the footsteps of W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, among others, led Ghana to independence on March 6, 1957. From Ethiopia, who largely avoided colonial domination, Ghana borrowed and inverted the green, yellow, and red colors of the Ethiopian flag for its own national flag and added a black star, the "lodestar" of African freedom.

Garvey's ideas on color symbolism affected the thoughts and actions of Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, who contributed, perhaps most profoundly, to the global visibility of kente as a symbol of African identity. During his historic visits with President Eisenhower in Washington, D.C., in 1958 and 1960, Nkrumah and his entourage wore kente often; in fact, *Ebony* covered the visit in the article "The Return of Saturday's Child," illustrated with 31 photographs, 13 of them showing Nkrumah in kente. In 1963, African American W.E.B. Du Bois traveled to Africa at Nkrumah's invitation and wore kente when he was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Ghana. By choosing kente for important and highly visible occasions, these and other leaders have helped to establish it as a potent symbolic image for Africans and African Americans alike.

Originally reserved for royalty and the elite in Ghana, kente is now available to almost everyone who has the desire to incorporate it into his or her lifestyle. It is now used in a variety of circumstances that differ dramatically from its original context. While the cloth worn by a chief is carefully woven in separate strips and sewn together to be elegantly draped by its royal wearer, contemporary kente-inspired clothing is often printed, not handwoven, and sewn into fitted garments to be worn by the general public. Both woven kente and printed versions are used for display purposes today, as articles for the home, decorative backdrops, or to add a special African flair to a setting. The cloth and references to it are incorporated into a wide array of African American celebrations, including Kwanzaa, Martin Luther King Day, Black History Month, Juneteenth, and others, as a fundamental symbol of a proud African American identity. Kente's popular symbolism is just as varied as its users and its usage, but it continues to communicate a complex and dynamic African identity.

