HISTORY OF TEXTILES IN GHANA, THE AKAN BACKGROUND

Abstract

Textiles production locally in Ghana has been one of the treasures of the Akans of Ghana for many years. Though other communities in Ghana are into textiles production in Ghana, the Asantes who belongs to the Akan ethnic group is credited with the history of textiles in Ghana. Popular among the textiles produced locally are Kente and Adinkra. In this work I am looking at how textiles and weaving for that matter started within the Akans and how it has evolved with time. I discussed the various changes that the textile has gone through and the stakeholders in these changes.

Keywords

Adinkra, Akan, Cloth, Kente, Textiles, Weaving

Introduction

The concise oxford dictionary-tenth edition defines textile as a type of cloth or woven fabric. The word textile itself originated from the Latin verb ‘texere’ which means weave. It consist the usage or the weaving of fibers or yarns. These fibers or yarns can be natural or artificial.

The history of textile or weaving for that matter dates back to the prehistoric era when man realized the need to cover their body. Though man had other objects for covering parts of their body, it became necessary as man developed to produce other materials such as textiles not only to cover their nakedness but also the harsh weather conditions. According to Miriam-Webster, 'the discovery of dyed flax fibers in a cave in the Republic of Georgia dated to 34,000 BCE suggests that textile - like materials were made even in pre-historic times'. This indicates that textiles have been an old component to man’s development for several centuries. Textiles were used not only for clothing, but as man developed the usage of textiles
also grew. Today, textiles are used for decorations, bags, baskets, furniture and have also come in various textures and colours.

**The genesis of textiles in Africa**

As civilization grew in the world, the African continent also benefited from this civilization. In fact, Africa is also identified as playing a leading role in the civilization process of the world. As this process of civilization was growing in Africa, the development of textile also grew along with it. According to Ofori-Ansah (2009), historical accounts traces weaving in Africa far back as about 3000 B.C. It further traces the uses of woven clothes to the medieval Ghana, Mali and Songhai Empires. It goes on to say that, 'archaeological excavations have produced such weaving instruments as spindle whorls and loom weights in ancient Moroe Empire which flourished between 500 B.C. and 300 A.D. In other African civilizations in the Nile Valley such as kemte (Egypt) and Nubia or Kush, there is abundance of pictorial and archaeological evidence proving the existence of a weaving industry as early as 3200 B.C.’

This gives the indication that Africa as a continent has a long standing history when it comes to textiles. The African has and continues to use textiles in their daily activities. Due to wars and migrations, it is believed the knowledge on textile has spread through the African continent. Textiles for that matter can now be found in every corner in Africa.

**Textiles in the Akan setting**

The history of textiles in current day Ghana can be traced many centuries ago. Textiles for several years could be found in various parts of Ghana with each one having unique history to its advent. Many writers have given out their perceptions and candid opinions about some of these developments. In his introduction in the book, Kente Cloth-Introduction to History, Asamoah-Yaw (1994), he says “Among modern kente weavers, there appears to be only a small fraction who can claim to have adequate historical knowledge of this ancient fabric. This opinion of mine therefore is solely based on the history of textile amongst the Akans with
emphasis on kente and the adinkra prints. This opinion is out of written documents and interviews from selected stakeholders in the said field.

As mentioned earlier, there are several stories regarding the emergence of textiles in Ghana, this assertion is also not different when it comes to the history surrounding the birth of kente within the Akan setting in Ghana. It is worth to note that, before the emergence of weaving or textiles within the Akan, the people were not naked but had other materials that they used for covering their body. According to Adomako (personal communication, 2012), a cultural consultant, notable among these kind of materials is a leaf called *fotor*. This kind of leaf is wide in shape, which is carefully arranged and tied around the private parts of the body. This was a preserve for adults and those in their adolescent stages. It is even stated that during this period, female adolescents do not cover the upper parts of their body just like that of the men. Collections of beads were also adorned by women on their waist to also help in the purpose of concealing their nakedness.

As weather conditions became harsher, the introduction of leather from skins of wild animals was used to cover the body. Hunters dried leathers from their hunted wild animals and used them for clothing. Some of these leathers were also used as bags and similar items for storing both liquid and solid materials.

Another significant discovery in this regard is the introduction of a kind of cloth from the bark of a tree called *kyenkyen* tree by the Asantes. The bark of this said tree is removed and beaten to achieve a textile-like material. The *kyenkyen* cloth became a very popular source of clothing.
These materials and others were been used till the introduction of textiles as materials for use.

**Kente**

Historical accounts trace the origin of Kente weaving to early weaving traditions in ancient West African Kingdoms that flourished between 300 A.D. and 1600 A.D. (Ofori-Ansah, 2009). Notwithstanding, the discovery of kente cloth within the Akans started in the 17th century. After synthesizing the information on kente or weaving, two main stories stand tall in the various narratives, both written and oral. The popular one is about two hunters by name *Ota Kraban* and *Ameyaw* who got the idea of weaving from the spider (Agya Kyere-Badu, personal communication, 2012). It is said that they observed the technique that the spider uses for the constructing of its web for some period of time and being fascinated by it decided to duplicate the technique. In the process, the kente weaving evolved. This took place in a village called Bonwire in the present day Ejisu Juaben District of the Ashanti Region. They used rough raffia and other roots and twigs for their weaving. As the weavers came into contact with cotton yarns, they made use of them and that has led to the rapid growth of Kente from Bonwire to other parts of the country. According to Asihene (1978), the word kente is an Akan word which is ke-ente that is, “whatever happens to it, it will not tear”.

**FIGURE 1** PICTURE OF A KYENKYEN CLOTH

This material and others were been used till the introduction of textiles as materials for use.
The most unpopular story also states that weaving actually started from the ancient Ghana Empire. During the collapse of the empires, people moved to all parts of Africa including present day Ghana. On the movements of the Asantes, Osei Kwadwo (2004) writes, inter-empire wars created instability at their places of abode therefore they moved southwards into the forest belt to avoid constant warfare and get the peace needed for their farming ventures. Some of these people came along with this technique of weaving. According to Plumer Cheryl, (1971), the same type of loom found in Northern Ghana today was in use in the twelfth century at the time of the Arab (Plumer Cheryl, (1971) African Textile [East Lansing, Mich....1971], P.9). Asihene, (1978) also states that weaving in Ghana dates back to the time of the great Empires of the Western Sudan.

According to the Fufuntoma Palace (personal communication,2012), in Adanwomase in Afigya Kwabre East district of the Ashanti Region, when Asantes migrated to the present day settlement, there were people among them who had the basic techniques of weaving. These weavers didn’t have the materials needed for this weaving so they used the available materials such as raffia and twigs from plants to weave something called Asaasentoma. This was done by creating triangular pegs on the ground for this process. As they develop, they transferred these pegs on wooden boards. Below is an example of such a board.

![FIGURE 2](image1.png) ![FIGURE 3](image2.png)

Since the material these weavers produced were triangular in nature, they were mostly tied together in twos to produce what the Asantes call “Danta”. During a war encounter by the Asantes at the present day Nkoransa in the Brong Ahafo Region, the then Asantehene, Otumfour Osei Tutu I came into contact with a group of weavers in a village called Yefri. These people used cotton for their weaving.
since they had cotton in their area. Upon contacting the weavers, they directed the Asantehene to a town called **Bontuku** in the present day Northern Ivory Coast. Upon his return, the Asantehene periodically sent people to buy woven cloth for him from Bontuku.

According to Osofo Kofi Gyimah of the Fufuntoma palace (personal communication, 2012), the Asantehene then decided to gather some of the weavers within Asante to go and learn the technique used by the people of Bontuku so that they would come back and serve as his weavers. These Weavers were selected from four villages namely; **Adanwomase, Bonwire, Nsuta Beposo and Asotwe**. Unfortunately, Nsuta Beposo and Asotwe were not able to stay for the entire duration of their training which was fourteen (14) years. After their return from the training, the weavers from Bonwire and Adanwomase settled at the Manhyia Palace where they wove for the Asantehene.

At a point in time, there was a conflict between the Manhyia palace and Juaben. Bonwire, Juaben and Ejisu are noted to be allies, so when the people of Juaben were fleeing to the present day Koforidua, some of the weavers from Bonwire fled with them to settle there. These weavers who fled started producing cloth for commercial purpose in Koforidua where it gained prominence and was associated with Bonwire.

According to Boateng (personal communication, 2012), the name kente came from when they started producing in Koforidua but the known name within the Asantes is “**Nwenntoma**” which means woven fabric. Most of the earliest Nwenntoma had names associated with the Manhyia Palace or royalty since they were produced for the Asantehene.

Examples of such early “Nwenntoma” are **kyeretwei, Faahia ko koyere Agyemang, Ohene Nko nfira, Tekoa Koro** and which a plain white cloth is **Ahwepan**. The earliest coloured Nwenntoma were blue and indigo.

**Pictures of some of the earliest nwenntoma for the Asantehene which is believed to be about three hundred years old.**
Adinkra cloth

Ntonso in the Afigya Kwabere East district of the Ashanti region is noted for the home of Adinkra cloth within the Asantes. Three Ntonso men who supposedly were the first Adinkra cloth makers were Opanin Kwaku Nsia, Pinkyehen and Kwadwo Appiah (Boakye 1995). Currently most of the families in Ntonso are engaged in the production of Adinkra in one way or the other.

Just like the kente cloth, there are also two schools of thought with regards to the advent of Adinkra cloth. One explanation states that, Nana Kofi Adinkra, King of Gyaman, angered the Asantehene by claiming he had the same Golden Stool as the Ashanti Kingdom. This resulted in a war where King Adinkra was slain in 1833 (Adomako, personal communication, 2012). It is believed that the cloth was introduced by craft men who were captured from Gyaman to produce the cloth from the patterns from the cloth and stool of King Adinkra.

FIGURE 9 A picture of the captured stool of King Kofi Adinkra (Prempeh II Jubilee Museum, Kumasi)
Another school of thought also states that, the Adinkra symbols were made and used by Dankyira, Takyiman and Ashanti in ancient times, long before the reign of King Adinkra. It was then called *Adwinikena*, believed to have been later corrupted to Adinkra (Asihene, 1978).

Aside the village of Ntonso, the practice of making Adinkra cloth spread to Kona and other Ashanti villages but has never been made in these places as much as it is in Ntonso.

The basic materials for making the Adinkra cloth include:

a. DYE – The dye is produced from the back and roots of the *Badie* and *Kuntunkuni* trees respectively (Nana Boakye, personal communication, 2012). These trees grow in the northern savannah. The plants are then processed to produce the dye. The botanical name of Badie is *Adansonia Digitata* and that of Kuntunkuni is *Bobax Brevicuspe*. These dyes are mostly black in colour.

b. STAMPS – Adinkra stamps are carved from calabash pieces. Only the thickest type of calabash is used in making Adinkra stamps. The Adinkra symbols represent proverbs, which express belief, philosophies, aesthetics and hopes of the Ashanti people and more specifically of the printer and weaver (Boakye 1995).

c. CLOTH – The adinkra symbols are printed on new kente strips. With the introduction of modern dyes, they now print red, brown and black funeral cloths as well as differently coloured cloths for various occasions. The darker shades are mostly donned on funeral occasions to mourn the dead (Agbo, 2011).
Examples of the Adinkra symbols

FIGURE 10
Conclusions

The relevance of textiles in our daily activities undoubtedly cannot be under compromised. Each day in and day out, weavers produce a lot of new designs for various uses. The production of textiles within the Asante setting continues to grow and it is acknowledged the world over which generates huge amount of foreign exchange into the country. For this reason the promotion of the textile industry should be encouraged to flourish. From such angle there is the need for us to know how this wonderful industry started, to help in shaping us for the future. It is very essential that the absolute truth be protected. For the truth always stands.

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Contributor details

As a Public Relations Officer at the Centre for National Culture- Kumasi Ghana, under the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Creative Arts, Mustapha Issah earned his first degree from the University of Ghana, Legon in Theatre Arts. He has participated in several workshops on the creative and cultural industry in Ghana. He is currently a postgraduate student at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology- Kumasi, Ghana. He is among the few students pursuing a Master of Philosophy programme in African Art and Culture. CONTACT: P.O.BOX 3085- KUMASI, GHANA. Madpython4b@yahoo.co.uk.