



The exhibition *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* is divided into two broad sections: first, it traces the roots of kente in Asante and Ewe cultures, in what is now central and eastern Ghana and parts of Togo, and its widespread use in Africa as garment and ceremonial cloth; then it explores kente as a meaningful document of dress, art, and identity in American cultures, specifically within African American communities in the United States.

Marvin Foyer and North Lobby

Introduction

The exhibition begins with the oral tradition that credits Ananse, the wise spider character from Akan oral literature with the introduction of weaving to the Asante heartland; a second oral tradition about kente origins attributes its introduction to a man name Ota Kraben who brought the technology from the north. Images of a chief and queen mother in kente complement the men's and women's cloths on display.

The Market

To give a sense of the rich variety of kente cloth and its by-products, a small kente "store" is recreated to provide visitors a sense of the various cloths found in these markets for sale.

The Colors of African Unity

Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first political leader is remembered today for his central role in achieving Ghana's political emancipation from British colonial rule, and he remains an important figure in the history of African independence movements. Nkrumah was responsible for making kente visible on the world stage. This section highlights the independence of Nkrumah and Ghanaian

A Calendar of Cloth

This section traces the contextual use of kente in African American communities for celebrated calendar-based events, as well as other occasions not specifically tied to the calendar such as weddings, church events, and Afrocentric marketplaces. This section foregrounds materials collected and documented by high school classes in Los Angeles, Newark, and other cities.

Ballenger Teachers Center

Kente and Childhood

Kente themed toys and books help children connect to an African identity. Several dolls, including "Ghanaian Barbie" are on exhibit in the Ballenger Teachers Center, along with a selection of children's books on African themes.



A Beautiful Cloth Does Not Wear Itself

This section focuses on the appropriate modes of wearing kente in Ghana and the variety of contexts in which kente defines the occasion as much as any other item of expressive culture. Photographic displays present chiefs' installations, the wearing of kente by gods in shrines and by the deceased at funerals, and colorful festival processions.

The Fine Art of Asante Kente

Included in this section are selected masterworks of Asante weaving that demonstrate the accomplishment of the art; the importance of each cloth name, which is rooted in the rich oral literature of the Asante, is also explained. Most cloths are identified by their warp (lengthwise) stripe patterning, though rarely is there a relationship between the pattern and its name.

The Fine Art of Ewe Kente

Neighbors of the Asante to the east, the Ewe (pronounced ay-vay) have their own version of kente, with an equally long history. Ewe cloth is distinguished from that of Asante by the incorporation of representational weft-faced (crosswise) motifs such as stools, daggers, an assortment of proverbial messages suggested by animal imagery, and by the occasional use of words woven into the strips.

What's in a Name? Warp Designs

Among the Asante peoples of Ghana, kente cloths are purchased as much for their names as for their beauty. As the cloths exhibited here demonstrate, cloth (warp stripe) names are derived from a variety of sources, including famous people, especially chiefs and queen mothers; natural phenomena; historical events; and proverbs. Complex designs are also woven into the crosswise, or weft, threads. These tend to have names taken from the environment and culture of the Asante. There are more than one thousand warp and weft names, and new patterns are being invented all the time.

What's in a Name? Weft Designs

Unlike the patterning of the lengthwise warp threads, most weft designs (woven across the warp threads) are named after objects—knives, bellows, combs, hats, etc. Also unlike most warp patterns, weft-faced designs tend to resemble their names. Some Asante kente cloths feature a single weft motif (adwen) repeated throughout, but more commonly a cloth will incorporate a number of designs. When weft designs are inserted into every available warp segment, the cloth is identified as Adweneasa, translated as “my skill is exhausted” or “my ideas are finished.”



Kente at Graduation

The wearing of kente to mark the achievement of graduation dates back to at least the late 1950s in Ghana. In the United States, kente stoles have become more and more commonplace at university graduations. While initially worn only by African American graduates, over the last ten years they have been included in more diverse commencement ceremonies, as well as in other contexts.

Kente and the State of Grace

African-style vestments and dress have been adopted by many faiths over the past forty years. While kente's role in the church is most pronounced during African American History Month, it appears throughout the year as drapes for pulpit and altar, as Bible covers, on the vestments of choirboys and church ushers, and on choir and ministerial robes.

In a Funeral Mode

The death, funeral, and burial rites of important chiefs, queen mothers, and venerated elders, and the subsequent installation and enstoolment ceremonies for the successor are also occasions for the selective use of kente. In addition to the deceased occasionally being dressed in kente, his or her funeral bed may be covered with the cloth and in some areas the funeral room is draped in kente.

Library Atrium

The Weaving of Kente

Asante kente weaving is defined and described through video documentation of the weaving process, two Ghanaian narrow-strip looms, weaving technology photo panels, and hands-on raw materials, including completed kente strips.

Portraits of Kente

The exhibition concludes with images of prominent African American leaders who have been photographed wearing and using kente. Visitors are encouraged to consider issues of fad and fashion and reflect on the meanings and forms of kente in African American life.

Crossing the Atlantic

Photographs of former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere and African American historian W.E.B. Du Bois introduce a section that examines the spread of kente beyond Ghana and its association with African unity and "Back to Africa" movements of the 1950s and 1960s.

Touch These Kente!

You are welcome to touch these cloths. Experience cloths made by a distinctly different technologies. Can you tell the differences in the feel of cotton and rayon? Are the weaves equally fine in all these examples?

