Wrapped in Pride

Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity

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2.1 Asantehene Otumfuo Opoku Ware II wearing an appliqué felt cloth known as Nkrawoo. The Asantehene is seated in state next to the Sika Dwa Kof (the Golden Stool born on Friday). Ghana Information Services.
A Brief History of the Asante

The Asante are the most populous and best known of the Akan (Twi-speaking) peoples of Ghana. Other Akan groups include the Akwamu, Fante, Akuapem, Denkyira, Akyem, Nzima, and Bono. The Asante still occupy a significant portion of south central Ghana, an area of once-dense tropical forest. The region has an average annual rainfall of around 150 cm (60 inches), which occurs during two rainy seasons—the first running roughly from May to July, and the second from September to November. These rains feed several important rivers, including the Tano, Offin, Pra, and Volta, all of which figure prominently in Asante history. There is only one substantial natural lake, Bosumtwi, which, according to some traditions, is believed to be near a cave or hole in the ground from which certain Akan groups originated (Rattray 1929, 131, 236). This explanation of local origins undoubtedly evolved as a justification of Asante domination over a large part of the surrounding territory.

Numerous Akan oral traditions—including a few belonging to the Asante—refer to migrations from the north. The naming of the modern state of Ghana—formerly the British colony known as the Gold Coast—after the medieval kingdom of the same name was in part impelled by these traditions. The medieval kingdom of Ghana, however, existed from the eighth to the eleventh century C.E. and was located between the Senegal and Niger Rivers in what is now western Mali and southern Mauritania. It is thus too far removed in time and place to be the actual origin of the Akan. Furthermore, Twi is a branch of the Kwa family of languages, which are spoken more or less continuously along the coast from southeastern Côte d’Ivoire across southern Ghana, Togo, and Benin and on to southwestern Nigeria. The nuclear settlement area of the Akan must certainly lie along this belt. In fact there seems to be some consensus that what was to become the Asante Empire was a consolidation of several related but smaller states moving into their present locations from more southerly areas (Fynn 1971, 28; Wilks 1975, 110, 111).

In the context of the present volume, an examination of the rise of the Asante Empire in the late seventeenth century is an appropriate point of departure and will introduce a number of important issues. The Asante have a fairly conventionalized tradition of chiefly succession. Before the consolidation of the Asante Empire under Osei Tutu, at least five chiefs are recognized: the tandem rulers Twum and Antwi; Kobia Amamfi, Oti Akenten, and Obiri Yeboa, an Oyoko clan leader. The latter was killed in battle in the last third of the seventeenth century, and his successor, Osei Tutu, is considered to be the first Asantehene of the Oyoko Dynasty. The initial impetus for the formation of the Asante Empire may be found in a series of military victories led by Osei Tutu, who utilized European firearms purchased on the coast and received support from the powerful Akan state of Akwamu. The beginning date of Osei Tutu’s reign is unclear. Ivor Wilks places the origins of the Asante Empire and the founding of its capital, Kumase, “perhaps about 1680” (1975, 111). The current “official” dates of Osei Tutu’s reign are listed as 1680–1717 in the “Programme” of 1995 for the Adae Kesse festival honoring the silver jubilee of Asantehene Opoku Ware II, the fifteenth Asantehene (see chapter 3).

The defining event of Osei Tutu’s reign was the creation of the Golden Stool born on Friday (Sika Dwa Kofi). According to accounts that can still be recited by virtually all Asante youths, the priest (akamfo) Anokye delivered a solid gold stool from the heavens, which landed gently on the knees of Osei Tutu. The stool was said to house the soul and spirit (sunsum) of the Asante nation. It was never to be used as a seat, indeed to this day it rests on its own chair (fig. 2.1). According to tradition, Okomfo Anokye then pulverized nail parings and hair taken from the most important Asante chiefs and queen mothers. He mixed this powder with various medicines to form a potion, some of which was consumed by the royals and some poured onto the Golden Stool to emphasize that the fate of the Asante was inextricably bound with that of this majestic object. To further ensure that there would be no challenges to the state symbol and embodiment of the Asante nation, the royal stools of all other leaders were buried along with other key items of regalia (see Rattray 1927, 289, 290; Kyeremateng 1969, 2–5).

The states (aman, sing. aman) that were united under the aegis of Osei Tutu and the Golden Stool in Kumase included Mampon, Kokofu, Bekwai, Nasuta, and Dwaben. Each of these was headed by its own paramount chief (amanhene, pl. amanhene), who was subordinate to the Asantehene and considered a divisional chief in the larger political order. The political organization of the Asante Empire was and is quite sophisticated and complex and is perhaps best delineated in Ivor Wilks’s landmark publication Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order (1975).
Of the five states mentioned above, the chiefs of all but Mampon are descended from the Oyoko clan (obusu), one of seven recognized by the Asante. Descent, inheritance, and succession among the Akan are matrilineal, meaning that they follow the mother's side of the family rather than the father's. For example, in the selection of a chief, the chief's sons are ineligible to succeed him. The new chief must come from the Oyoko clan, and by rules of marriage the old chief would have married someone from a clan other than his own. The chief's younger brothers or his mother's sister's sons or her daughter's sons could succeed him, however, assuming they met certain other physical and leadership qualifications.

This system of descent provides considerable prestige and power to the queen mother (ghema; see figs. 1.4, 3.28). This woman may literally be the mother of the chief, her sister, her sister's daughter, or even the chief's sister. The queen mother is actively involved in the selection of the chief, and the Asantehene, or queen mother of the Asante (fig. 3.6), selects the Asantehene in consultation with the royal elders, various Kumase chiefs, and certain amahene. The queen mother is said to serve as regent until the enthronement of a new chief (Kyeremateng n.d., 12, 13). Like the chief, the queen mother has her own regalia including a royal stool, palanquin, fans (see fig. 3.37), jewelry, and kente.

Asante Regalia

It is generally maintained that the seventeenth-century ancestors of the Asante were under the domination of the kingdom of Adanse and later that of Denkyira (Fynn 1971, 27–29) and that the leadership of Osei Tutu brought about the defeat of the latter in 1701. Much of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Asante history is concerned with military conquests and political agreements aimed at controlling trade with Europeans on the coast and with Islamic regions to the north. The Asante were particularly interested in acquiring firearms, gunpowder, iron, brassware, cloth, salt, and various luxury goods from the south for which they exchanged gold, ivory, and slaves (until slavery was abolished in the early nineteenth century). From the north, the Asante also received cloth (both cotton and silk) in addition to shea butter (a multipurpose vegetable fat), ivory, and assorted manufactured goods, which were exchanged largely for gold and kola nuts, a popular stimulant and a very lucrative trade item (Wilks 1975, 178, 179).

Whether in trade with the north or south, or even with peoples to the east and west, cloth figures prominently in Asante mercantile interests. In addition to woven fabrics, raw materials—cotton, silk, and dye stuffs—were also important commodities. The introduction of weaving to Asante from the north is addressed in chapter 6. A perusal of Rattray's discussion of Asante weaving makes it clear that a significant percentage of cloth patterns
(that is, warp-strip configurations) were once solely the prerogative of the Asantehene or other designated chiefs. The obvious conclusion here is that the development of Asante fine weaving, now known as kente, was stimulated by and under the control of royal patronage. Nsadsuo (as fine Asante kente is indigenously known) is only one component of a spectacular array of royal regalia that buttresses the institution of kingship or chieftaincy.

Stools are the most important and complex of all items of Asante royal regalia. The central supports are carved in many named patterns (some of which coincide with names used for kente), and more important chiefs typically have larger stools, often decorated with silver. Some stools may serve as state symbols and others as the personal seat of the ruler. Asante gods are also frequently placed on stools (see chapter 5). Upon the death of an honored chief or queen mother, his or her personal stool is blackened with soot and sheep’s blood and stored in an ancestral stool room where it receives periodic offerings, prayers, and sacrifices (see Kyeremateng 1969 and Sarpong 1971).

Kente and other royal textiles are classified as “stool property” and are thought to be owned by the state as a whole. Such heirloom regalia is called agyapafile. Rattray explains the etymology of the word as “ode-pe-qpia, something sought after (by the ancestors) and then put aside (for safekeeping)” (1929, 331). The chief is considered a trustee of the state regalia and is expected to make significant additions to it at his own expense. Rattray goes on to cite traditional law supporting this:

There was an immemorial law to the effect that everything which became attached to a Stool became the inalienable property of that Stool. “One does not break off leaves, place them in the mouth of an elephant, and then take them out,” and, “Something that has fallen into a well does not get taken out again,” are two legal maxims bearing on this subject. [Rattray 1929, 331]

The Asantehene has a designated official, the Abenasehene, who is in charge of the storing and maintenance of the king’s cloths including their mending. He is also said to select the king’s cloth for public appearances. Tradition maintains that the Asantehene does not appear in public wearing the same textile twice. Nevertheless, Opoku Ware II has been photographed in the same cloth on different occasions, so this practice has become somewhat relaxed (Kyeremateng n.d., 3; Boaten 1993, 26, 30). According to one account the Asantehene has “300,000” cloths in his treasury (Boaten 1993, 30). This number could be either a fairly significant typographical error or a figure of considerable symbolic significance. Regardless, it is certainly a measure of the importance of cloth as a status symbol and form of wealth.
Kente and the Prempehs

Photographs of Asantehene date back to Nana Mene Bonsu (r. 1874–1883; see Wilks 1976, 39, 40). There is an especially rich record for the last three Asantehene: Nana Agyeman Prempeh I (r. 1888–1931; figs. 2.2, 2.3); Nana Osei Agyeman Prempeh II (r. 1931–1970; figs. 2.4–2.7); and Nana Opoku Ware II (r. 1970 to present; see figs. 2.8, 2.9a–c). A systematic compilation and examination of all extant photographs of Asante kings would undoubtedly reveal a remarkable history of cloth use and could be the subject of a fascinating book in itself.

Details from even the small selection of photographs included here raise interesting questions about the formal development of kente. For example, in figure 2.2, Prempeh I is wearing a cloth that has a half-width strip on the bottom. This serves perhaps as a protective buffer between the main body of the cloth and the ground with which it frequently comes into contact. Examples of a strip of solid-color plain weave used on one or both sides of more complex fine weaves are also seen in two early examples illustrated in figure 10.9 and 10.12, and these probably served the same purpose. Asante weavers in Bonwire are not familiar with either practice, and it probably died out in the first part of this century.

The beginnings of double weave are also open to debate. I know of no examples of handpicked double weave weft designs (see chapter 6) from the nineteenth century, either in photographs or extant cloths. The photograph of Prempeh II, circa 1960 (fig. 2.6) is remarkably one of the earliest of an Asantehene wearing such a cloth, as seen on the third and fifth strips from the bottom. Bonwire weavers maintain that this tradition dates to the early part of this century, but it seems possible that it postdates Prempeh I's return from exile in 1924.

2.2 Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh I at Elmina in 1896, prior to being sent into exile (first to Freetown, Sierra Leone, and then to the Seychelles). He appears to be wearing a cloth known as "Obi nyee obi kwan mu s" (Eventually one strays into another's path). Basel Mission Archive D-30.18.068, Elmina 1896.

2.3 Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh I shown wearing an Oyokoman cloth after his return from exile. Basel Mission Archive D-30.6200.3, 1926.

2.5 Asantehene Osei Agyeman Prempeh II wearing a cloth known as Asantehene Beshehene or Nana Prempeh Beshehene (see Menzel 1972, nos. 683, 684). Basel Mission Archive D-10.62.081.

2.6 Asantehene Osei Agyeman Prempeh II wearing a cloth with alternating strips of Kubi (a man’s name) and Oyokoman. This photograph taken circa 1960 is one of the earliest showing a cloth with solid blocks of double weave watt designs (on the third and fifth strips from the bottom). Photograph by Paul Anane, Ghana Information Services.

2.7 Asantehene Osei Agyeman Prempeh II wearing an Oyokoman Adwenessaa Assia cloth (see chapter 8). Ghana Information Services.
The Asante capital of Kumase is located on a prominent rocky ridge above the Nsuben River. In the nineteenth century the town had a population that varied from about fifteen thousand to forty thousand. The Asantehene’s palace covered an area of nearly five acres and like much Asante architecture was built up from units of one or two rooms on each side of a relatively square courtyard. The walls consisted of earth and cane, and roofs were thatched with palm fronds (see Wilks 1975, 374–86). The surface of the palace walls were finished in low relief decoration that included both abstract and representational imagery, some of which was shared with other Akan art forms. Remnants of this style of architecture are still found conserved in a few extant structures scattered around the Asante region (see Swindenbank 1969). The palace and Kumase itself had a few two-story structures, including a stone building called the Aban completed under Asantehene Osei Bonsu in 1822 by masons from the coast. It was intended as a museum or palace of culture inspired in part by accounts of the British Museum. This is where the treasures of the Asantehene were stored. The British removed most of the Aban’s valued contents and took them to England before destroying the structure during the sacking of Kumase in 1874 (Wilks 1975, 200, 201).

**Art of the Asante: The Visual-Verbal Nexus**

At the time of the founding of Kumase, near the end of the seventeenth century, the Asante homelands were rich in animal life—wild boar, an assortment of monkeys, an impressive variety of birds, small antelopes, large land snails, and tortoises provided food. Rivers were filled with fish and freshwater crabs. There were also porcupines, leopards, elephants, and crocodiles, which played and continue to play roles that are more symbolic than subsistence oriented within the context of Asante life.
The land also naturally provided oil palms, wild yams, and kola nuts. The Asante practiced a system of slash-and-burn shifting agriculture, and indigenous West African cultivars included white and yellow yams, guinea corn, fonio, and pearl millet. With European contact beginning in the late 1400s, new crops from Asia and the Americas were introduced. From the East came varieties of yam, taro, and sugar cane; and from the Americas, ground nuts, cassava, cocoyam, pineapples, and several varieties of maize. Also from the Americas came tobacco, and locally produced tobacco pipes began to be made around 1600 C.E.

To attempt a systematic description of the flora and fauna of the Asante tropical forest is obviously well beyond the scope of any study of Akan expressive culture. Such a presentation, however, would shed considerable light on how the Asante see much of their immediate environment, which in turn stimulates and informs an artistic tradition whose forms, subjects, and meanings are probably more diverse than that of any other African culture. There are few animals, plants, objects, and human experiences that have not been addressed at one time or another by one of the more than fifty artistic genres that constitute the Akan aesthetic universe (see Cole and Ross 1977 and McLeod 1981).

A description of the Asante environment has as much to do with the intellectual life of the people as it does with such fundamental anthropological concerns as subsistence patterns and local economies. The vast majority of Akan arts draw their imagery from or are named after an enormous corpus of subjects, many of which are shared across object types. In some instances these are simply identified by their name, but more frequently they are associated with a proverb, folktale, boast, insult, riddle, or other verbal form that extends the meaning of a given subject. This visual-verbal nexus of Akan art is one of its defining features.

For example, the rainbow is a motif found on stools (dwa), counselor’s staffs (akyemame poma), ceramics (kunuu), and kente, among other genres. Sometimes it is merely called nyankontan (God’s arch). On one of the staffs of a counselor to the Asante it is known as the “circular rainbow” (kontforkrowo). The carver of the staff, Osie Bonsu, explained in English “the Asantehene was the rainbow that surrounded all his subjects” (Ross 1984, 38). In another context the same image might prompt the proverb “The rainbow of death encircles every man’s neck” (that is, death is inevitable; Sarpong 1974, 21). Some of these proverbial associations are highly conventionalized, and others may be more open-ended with multiple or even conflicting interpretations (see Cole and Ross 1977, 9–12).

There was something of a renaissance in Asante royal arts, including kente, from the time of the return of Agyeman Prempeh I from exile in 1924 through the installation of Prempeh II in 1931 and the restoration of the Asante Confederacy in 1935. During this period the Asantehene reasserted their political rights, in part through public displays of regalia, and other chiefs similarly competed for attention and power from the colonial administration (see Ross 1977, 25). That cloth, among the most personal and visual of all arts, was part of this renaissance and negotiation for power is not surprising. The present Asantehene, Nana Opoku Ware II (fig. 2.8), has continued a distinguished history of royal patronage, and cloths recently commissioned by him rival the finest of all Asante kente (figs. 2.9a–c).
I have learned through my parents to admire kente and to appreciate that for most Ghanaians, kente cloths are heirlooms. They are precious treasures given on significant occasions and hopefully passed down from mother to daughter, uncle to nephew, father to son. They are chosen with care and given with great consideration to mark births, marriages, grand occasions. Attention is paid to the symbolism of the occasion and, where relevant, the meaning of the design itself. Mother owned, at one point, several full kente cloths; but very few have survived the vicissitudes of exiles, coups, thefts, and confiscations. My mother’s clothes are grand affairs, and they have inspired a love of kente, the art and artistry, the symbolism, the style. I started my own collection with cloths that I refer to as shawls. I share the stories of three of these, interwoven with the stories of the first three kentes I remember—mother’s oldest and most treasured, those that did survive the uncertainties of time.

The First Shawl, 1977

I have a picture in my mind of me being handed a gift in the house in England where I grew up. I’m with my mother in her bedroom, and we are standing on opposite sides of her bed; it is the summer after my graduation, and I am living at home again. We are planning what I should wear to a most important affair. I had entered the Vogue talent contest for new writers and artists that year and had been named a finalist. I bought a new floral, navy cocktail dress, silky with full knife pleats and a boat neckline, elegant but so European. And I need a shawl or something to complete my outfit and make it mine. My mother takes me upstairs and pulls a beautiful new kente shawl out of her cupboard. Unlike the Sika Futuro cloth she has kept for me for my wedding day, this is a shawl that she has bought new, as a gift, because it was beautiful. It wasn’t necessarily bought for me; mother has a wonderful habit of buying beautiful things when she can, for their possibility—every beautiful object will find its right person, its own occasion to be given as a gift. And this is one. I become the recipient, casually, incidentally, because this is an occasion where I would need such a shawl to wear. There are no ceremony; in fact she is a little distressed because it has a slight stain where some perfume given to her as a gift has spilled in her case on the journey. This is her second exile, and things brought from home are scarce. For me, it is the first kente I have ever owned. It is a simple plain weave of blue-and-gold silk stripes with a border in red and yellow, the design of fingers alternating with short stripes of what looks to me like the simplified sign of the snail (fig. 4.1). Over the years it has become soft with wear, as old kente silk does with time. One evening a decade later in the U.S., coming back from an Oxford University reunion party at the UN, we were deluged with a sudden shower of summer rain—unusually heavy—and the shawl, which I was wearing on my head as an elaborate scarf, was drenched. The soaking and later a dry cleaning removed the small traces of perfume stain that had been on it since it was bought but made the gold uneven. It also made it so comfortable to wear. All its associations are joyful, and twenty years ago I won the talent competition it now commemorates.

The First Cloth, 1953/1968

The first time I ever wore kente cloth was in 1968 at my aunt’s wedding, the second time I was in a wedding party as a bridesmaid. There is a picture of us all with me as chief bridesmaid (for the first of many such times) in a green kente cloth wrapper and a green silk blouse my mother sewed for the occasion. I have it to wear because it is one of the three she managed to bring with her into the first of our two exiles. She had bought it as a gift to herself in the 1950s, around the time I was born—the first piece she bought for herself. After the wedding she gave it away to her cousin whose wedding it was. So this kente has survived because mother gave it away as a wedding gift long ago. My aunt has it still.

The Second Shawl, Owia Repur, 1988

It is Beijing, China, the Fourth World Congress on Women, 1995; I have now owned this shawl for seven years. I am standing in the lobby of the “UN” building, outside one of the conference rooms, when I spot the familiar kente pattern on a surprising person. The spectacular and unusual white sun rising in a red sky over a black earth is the symbol of my father’s Progress Party—a party banned since 1972, which like all other political parties of that era has had to undergo various metamorphoses (figs. 4.2–4.4). But neither its name nor its symbol can be resurrected in the current political arena. The symbol was my mother’s idea; she suggested it in those early heady days of the party’s formation, after the ban on politics was lifted one year prior to the 1969 elections. A number of party stalwarts,
gathered at my parents' home, had been wrestling with the question of what our symbol should be, when my mother suggested the rising sun. That is how we felt, a sun coming up on a new dawn, and so it was. Together, they discussed and adopted it and chose the colors. A weaver turned it into a kente of striking beauty. The main body of the cloth alternates the striking rising sun (which people will say symbolizes divine power, progress, and enlightenment; though few will state that it was created as the symbol of the Progress Party) with the symbol—in yellow and green added to the red, black, and white—of the ceremonial shield, which stands for political and spiritual defense. The border alternates three motifs: the steps, symbolizing advancement and perseverance, the snail shell, symbolizing endurance and self-containment—both in red and yellow—and the plant symbol of healing and spiritual protection, which adds a blue stripe to the red. When after a decade and a half Nana Asante Frempong decided, despite injunctions, to weave it again, the first one off his loom he brought to the U.S. and gave to me. He, too, was once a member of the party. Yet time is a great leveler, and not all people read signs and symbols. Today, it is just a popular kente design. But here in Beijing, I am intrigued by the weaver, so I go and greet her. She is serving as a minister in the very government, which in an earlier incarnation had banned the Progress Party. I introduce myself and comment on the beauty of her kente; she clearly is quite proud of it. I have seen her photographed in it a number of times. It is much used and clearly treasured. I cannot resist expressing my surprise at seeing her wear it... she doesn’t seem to understand. So, very gently, I tell her my name and remind her of the origins of the symbol. Suddenly she clutches at the shawl, surprise and discomfort registering in her eyes. I really don’t think she knew... I have not seen any pictures of her wearing it recently. I continue to wear mine with pride. In a way, through the weaver, this is a gift from both my parents.

4.3 Abena Busia wearing a kente featuring the Owia Repur motif, the symbol of her father's Progress Party. Photograph by Anne Spencer; New Brunswick, 1997.

4.4 Detail of kente strip with Owia Repur motif. Private collection.

4.5 Dr. K. A. Busia and Naa-Morkor Busia, Abena’s parents, at their wedding in 1950. Her mother wears an Adweneasa Sika Futoro kente.
Fifteen years ago my mother gave me a sample of a kente cloth. It is not wearable, being far too small for a wrapper and too broad and short for a shawl. It was indeed woven as a sample of the weaver's craft. It is a sample piece of the classic gold Sika Futuro cloth she was married in; "gold dust," it is more treasured than the substance it was named after. The man who wove her wedding cloth gave her his sample as a gift, and she gave it to me so that I could use it as a wall hanging in my new flat when she visited me in the United States for the first time. This year, I inherit the real thing, the one she wore at her wedding. When she married in 1950, wearing kente was not considered either fashionable, or appropriate. Highly schooled people—my father and mother had an Oxford doctorate and nursing diploma respectively—were required to display the sophisticated ways of Europeans and set the standard with Western fashion. My mother should have been imitating Josephine Baker in designer costumes, hats, and gloves, especially as they were actually getting married in England, in Oxford too. But my parents, decades ahead of their day and proud of who they were and where they came from, wore the kente (fig. 4.5). It is curious today to think that they had to do this in defiance of friends and family, against the tide. Not only do fashions change, the politics of wearing kente change. I have now inherited this precious cloth, and this summer, almost half a century since it was made for my mother's wedding, I shall wear it at my own. No one will be surprised, and most people will be touched and pleased.

The Third Shawl, Adweneasa
The only kente I ever bought for myself, I also bought for my mother. I chose a shawl woven by the same weaver who gave me the Progress Party shawl, selecting a classic motif in yellow; the creation of this design is said to have exhausted the ingenuity of royal weavers (fig. 4.6). And my memory also is exhausted. Dates blur, some dates are specific and forever etched in memory because of the occasion—some blur, I remember the season but not the exact moment; I know the time before and the occasions since but not the exact day when. I have worn this shawl countless times but am uncertain when I bought it. I have had it more than a decade, and the only picture I have of me wearing it is a fairly recent one, taken two years ago at the baptism of my goddaughter. And on that occasion I'm wearing both mine and the one I gave to mother—one around my head and the other slung over my shoulder and wrapped around the child.

The Third Cloth, Toku Akra Ntoma, 1951/1997
I am looking at two photographs, one of my mother on my elder brother's wedding day and the other of my sister holding her only daughter in her arms at the child's christening. (fig. 4.7) They are wearing the same cloth. It is strikingly beautiful, predominantly white, in a design that symbolizes self-sacrificial leadership and veneration of the ancestors. Once mother's, she gave it to my sister; it is appropriate that my sister wears it on this day. Mother also received it as a gift, nearly fifty years ago when it was new. It was a gift to her from father to celebrate the birth and dedication of their son, our elder brother. For that reason, over thirty years later, mother wore it on his wedding day. Then, in the following decade, she gave it as a gift to my sister before her wedding. And my sister wore it for her daughter's dedication—two weddings: my mother at my brother's, my sister for her own; two dedications: my mother at my brother's, my sister at her daughter's; one celebration kente for three generations.

4.6 Abena Busia wearing an Adweneasa cloth, the only kente she ever purchased for herself. Photograph by Anne Spencer, New Brunswick, 1997.

4.7 The author's sister wearing a kente cloth in the pattern known as Toku Akra Ntoma. She holds her daughter at the child's christening. Photograph by Anne Spencer, New Brunswick, 1997.
10.1 Artist's interpretation of early seventeenth-century men's dress along the Gold Coast based on written descriptions by Pieter de Marees (1602).

10.2 Artist's interpretation of early seventeenth-century women's dress along the Gold Coast based on written descriptions by Pieter de Marees (1602).

10.3 Market scene with cloth sellers in the center based on written descriptions by Pieter de Marees (1602).
Shortley after the beginning of Portuguese contact with what came to be called the Gold Coast of West Africa, visitors to the area began to record in writing the clothing and adornment practices of coastal peoples. These books were largely responsible for shaping initial European impressions of West Africans. One of the most significant and detailed of these was Pieter de Marees's Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602), which includes the following observations on men’s dress:

[T]hey take two fathoms of Linen and put it between their legs and around their body like a belt, letting it hang down below the knees, like Portuguese Trousers. When they go outside their houses they take another fathom of Linen, Silk or other cloth around their neck or over their shoulders and under their arms, as if it were a Mantle. [Van Dantzig and Jones 1987, 34]

The description of the loin cloth in the first sentence closely approximates practices that continued into the twentieth century in some areas. As for the second cloth it is difficult to conceive how it could go “over their shoulders” and “under their arms” at the same time, although if the two body parts were referred to in the singular, this could correspond to current practice where the man’s cloth passes under the right arm and over the left. As the translators note, a “fathom” of linen is only about three feet (van Dantzig and Jones 1987, 34 n. 2), which is considerably smaller than the familiar men’s clothes of today. Still, we have an early indication of the practice of wearing a wrapped garment. The “Linen” referred to was probably a Dutch import and should not be confused with strip-woven cloth.

Although we know very little about de Marees, he appears to have had a fairly sophisticated knowledge of textiles and distinguishes cotton, silk, wool, and flax throughout his narrative, specifically referring to Holland linen, Leiden Say (a thin European textile popular in the sixteenth century), Spanish blankets, and Spanish serges (van Dantzig and Jones 1987, 34, 39, 44, 52, 54, 62, 85). His description of more elaborate women’s dress is also of interest:

[When] they go to Market... they wrap another piece of linen around their bodies, with another [cloth] belt under it, and hang one or two fathoms of Linen from below their breasts down to their feet, like a Frock. On top of that they take yet another cloth of “Smolleken,” Leiden Say or striped Linen, and hang it around their bodies, over their shoulders and under their arms like a little mantle. [Van Dantzig and Jones 1987, 39]

Of particular importance here is the translators’ note on “een ander cleet von Smolleken,” literally “another cloth [made] of little Narrow ones.” This probably refers to locally produced cotton cloth, made by sewing together the narrow strips woven on the traditional loom. Much of this cloth was imported from... what is now the Ivory Coast” (van Dantzig and Jones 1987, 39 n. 5). So here we most likely have a reference to strip-woven cloth even though it is probably neither Asante or Ewe.

De Marees included engravings in his book depicting both men’s and women’s dress with lengthy and detailed captions (figs. 10.1–10.3). Adam Jones has cautioned against relying on these images as accurate representations, since they were drawn from the author’s written descriptions and not direct observation (Jones 1988, 13). Accurate or not, however, they did convey to de Marees’s audience images of a people with a strong interest in textiles and with a variety of clothing types differentiated by social status.

Perhaps the earliest reference to Asante weaving is based on observations by a Danish envoy named Nog to the court of Opoku Ware I in the 1730s:

Some of his subjects were able to spin cotton, and they wove bands of it, three fingers wide. When twelve strips long were sewn together it became a “Panties” or sash. One strip might be white, the other one blue or sometimes there were red ones among them. Opoku bought silk taffeta and materials of all colours. The artists unraveled them so that they obtained large quantities of woolen and silk threads which they mixed with their cotton and got many colours. [Ramer 1965 (1760), 36]

There are a number of interesting details in this description. First there is a suggestion of the width of the strip, “three fingers wide,” which is less than the average width today but is consistent with many of the strips in nineteenth-century examples. There is also a reference to the number of strips (twelve) sewn together to make a whole cloth. Today women’s cloths may have ten to fourteen strips compared to the conventional twenty-four for men, so either Nog is referring to a woman’s cloth or men’s cloths were much smaller in the first half of the eighteenth century and were worn more like a short cape or mantle.
10.4 Asante musician in Kumase wearing a warp-striped kente with weft-faced blocks of design. From a drawing by Thomas Bowdich (1819, drawing no. 5).

10.5 Asante loom in the courtyard of a Kumase house. From a drawing by Thomas Bowdich (1819, drawing no. 3).

10.6 Ewe kente collected before 1847. Danish National Museum, Copenhagen, Gc 192. Photograph by John Lee.


The mixed strips of white, blue, and red are also of interest, a point that will be developed later in this chapter. Finally, there is the reference to unraveling European textiles, especially silk, to obtain threads with colors not available from local dyes.

British envoy Thomas Bowdich visited Kumase in 1817 and was clearly impressed by Asante weaving, remarking that “the fineness, variety, brilliance and size of their cloths would astonish” (1966 [1819], 310). He observed chiefs “in the general blaze of splendor and ostentation” who wore Ashante cloths, of extravagant price from the costly foreign silks which had been unravelled to weave them in all the varieties of colour, as well as pattern; they were of an incredible size and weight, and thrown over the shoulder exactly like the Roman toga. (1966 [1819], 35)

Here again we have a reference to the unraveling of foreign silks to increase the range of colored threads available to Asante weavers. As discussed in chapter 6, these threads were more frequently employed to create weft-faced blocks of design than the warp. Bowdich illustrated his book with his own drawings, and one image of a harp-lute player has sufficient detail to reveal the man’s blue-and-white striped cloth with intermittent weft-faced designs (fig. 10.4).
Another Bowdich illustration depicts a loom in the courtyard of an Asante house (fig. 10.5). Although it is unlikely that a weaver would work in the open without any protection from the sun, the representation of the loom is relatively accurate. Bowdich mentions collecting a loom and a textile “having precisely the same appearance on both sides” for the British Museum (Bowdich 1966 [1819], 310). Unfortunately neither has been positively identified in the museum (see McLeod 1981, 154).

The earliest extant cloths known to me in museums are those now in the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen, and the Museum of Culture, Basel. The eight cloths collected by Eduard Carstensen, governor of Danish possessions on the Gold Coast between 1844 and 1850 were all identified as “kinte.” One of the Copenhagen pieces (fig. 10.6) was accessioned in 1847. The cloth’s twenty-seven strips contain an assortment of representational inlays, including a crocodile, frog, snake, and crab, along with such items of regalia as a stool, sword, umbrella, and combs (see fig. 9.3 for a detail of this cloth). This along with a report of the cloth coming from Popo confirms an Ewe attribution.

A second textile in the Danish National Museum was acquired in 1850 and has also been attributed to the Ewe (fig. 10.7). Nevertheless its thirty-two strips include a fairly consistent repetition of six different warp patterns, five of which are readily recognizable in Rattray’s 1927 corpus of Asante indigo designs; the sixth has a plain white warp. Although it is possible that the Ewe used the same warp patterns at this time, I am more inclined to view this cloth as Asante. A third cloth dating from this same period alternates three different strips with simple warp stripes (fig. 10.8). After cloths consisting of a repetition of the same strip, cloths with two or three different strips were probably the most commonplace.
The early cloths in Switzerland were acquired as part of Basel Mission activities during the nineteenth century. The earliest was collected by the missionary Andreas Riis in 1840 in Akropong. What is most readily apparent in this cloth is the rigid geometry produced by lining up the weft-faced blocks of design on alternate strips to create a kind of elongated checkerboard (fig. 10.9). This textile could be either Ewe or Asante, and cloths from both areas were undoubtedly available to Akropong, which is located between the two.

This work contrasts dramatically with another Basel Mission piece collected before 1888 from Kumase (fig. 10.10). Here again we have a repetition of the same warp-stripe pattern throughout the cloth, but the weft-faced designs are scattered randomly across the surface. In these weft blocks we can recognize the familiar Asante configuration of three units of Babadua separated by units of adwen (see chapter 6), but the weaver made no attempt to keep these units at a consistent length; they could not, therefore, have been sewn in a rigid grid even if this was desired.

A third Basel Mission textile was acquired from Abetifi by the missionary Gottlob Dilger in 1886 (fig. 10.11). Abetifi is considerably closer to the Asante than the Ewe, which would favor an Asante attribution. Again we have the repetition of the same warp stripe (twenty-eight times) with weft blocks lined up on alternate strips, although the corners of the blocks are not immediately adjacent as in figure 10.9.

The fourth Basel Mission cloth (fig. 10.12), collected sometime before 1914 by Adolf Kirchner at an unrecorded location on the Gold Coast, is also perhaps a nineteenth-century example. This remarkable weaving alternates two different warp-stripe patterns.
over twenty strips but is edged on the sides by two different strips (with no weft designs). These outside strips nevertheless maintain the dark/light alternation of the interior strips. The piece is most likely Ewe since the "tweedlike" effect in some of the weft-faced blocks is produced by twisting two different colored threads. Lamb considered this a recent innovation, but clearly it is of some duration (1975, 171).

These seven early cloths are of particular interest for two reasons. Only one of them has the "finished" or "bordered" ends (fig. 10.6) that are characteristic of most twentieth-century Asante kente. The "finish" where it does exist is also very simple and consists of a row of X-like designs and a fringe, not at all comparable to what can be seen in the first example in the "Catalog of Ewe Weaving," for example. A close examination of late nineteenth-century photographs (see below) provides little evidence of this finish, which leads to the conclusion that it only became common and conventionalized in the twentieth century.

The second point of interest rests with the dominant combination of faded red, green, and yellow weft blocks in figures 10.6 and 10.9 and an emphasis on this combination in figure 10.10. These examples can be multiplied several times in early twentieth-century kente and represent a distinct set of color preferences. As will be discussed in detail later, these colors will become very important in the Ghanaian independence movement, and for some of the same, as well as some different, reasons, they will also have considerable currency in various Black nationalist and Pan Africanist initiatives in the United States.
Perhaps more important than these early Basel Mission weavings is the impressive body of photography taken by missionaries or otherwise deposited at the Basel Mission Archive. Founded in 1815 the Mission has been active in Ghana since 1828, and the earliest photographs in its archive date from the 1860s. Of nearly five thousand photographs taken in the Gold Coast and now in the Basel Mission, about half of them focus on African peoples. A wonderful array of kente, both Asante and Ewe, is worn in the photographs, and many cloths can be “read” with remarkable clarity (figs. 10.13, 10.14). Even a cursory survey of the images confirms that textiles framed by a distinct border are rare in early cloths, as are textiles woven and sewn to form a rigid grid. In the dress of chiefs, cloths that repeat the same pattern seem to be about as common as those that alternate two or more different strips (cf. figs. 10.15, 10.16 with the previous two photographs). The latter type is considerably less popular today.

In images that show a chief with his entourage, a hierarchy of dress is readily apparent. One of the earliest prints in the corpus is an image of “The king of Kumase’s ambassador, sent to Cape Coast in 1872” (fig. 10.17). The ambassador is the only person clearly seated on a chair and wears a cloth with at least three different strips, two of which have weft inlays. The official to his right is probably his senior counselor and also wears a fine kente with weft-faced designs. The remainder of the handwoven textiles on view have simple warp stripes with no weft patterns.
A second chief photographed with his subjects wears a kente with at least seven varied warp-stripe patterns (fig. 10.18). To his right, again, is the next highest ranking person in the photograph, and he wears a cloth a cut below that of his chief. Only one other handwoven cloth is worn, and it is a plain warp-stripe kente on a man behind and slightly to the left of the chief. Among other prominent court officials, the chief sword-bearer occupies a position near the top. Distinguished by an eagle feather headdress, this official at Abetifi was photographed wearing a full man's cloth pulled off his shoulder and wrapped around his waist (fig. 10.19). The blocks of Babadu are clearly apparent as befitting the status of this individual.

Basel Mission photographs make it clear that women could also wear high-status textiles (figs. 10.20–10.23). The women lined up with chewing sticks in their mouths (fig. 10.20) are gathered for an undisclosed occasion, perhaps just for the photograph; most of them, including several young girls, wear fine cloths. The fourth woman from the right even has a cloth woven and sewn to form a tight grid, which requires considerably more attention to detail than do the other cloths on view.

A meticulous analysis of the Basel Mission photographs would likely shed considerable light on the development of Asante and Ewe weaving between about 1865 and 1915. As it is, the archive provides our most substantial view of clothing practices of the period and the encroaching influence of British colonialism and European missionary values. There are even images of the appropriation of strip-woven cloths for purposes other than apparel (fig. 10.24).

Before kente began making its way to the United States, it was moving out of the Gold Coast and into Nigeria at least as early as the 1930s. Around 1937 G. L. Jones collected a cloth obviously modeled on a Gold Coast kente that was woven by an Igbo woman from Akpete on a fixed vertical loom (fig. 10.25). Lisa Aronson documents the two-hundred-year-old trade in Ewe and other strip-woven cloths out of Popo, in present-day Togo, into the Ijo area of the Niger Delta (1982). In addition, she records an Ewe weaver who moved into Aba, a southern Igbo village, in the 1930s and an Ijo man who in 1939 apprenticed in the Ewe town of Keta before returning to Finima in the Delta. Both weavers passed on Ewe traditions and styles to local peoples. These examples suggest the dynamic complexity of trade and the exchange of weaving ideas along the West African Coast.

It has been argued that before any actual kente ever reached the United States, visual retentions of the cloth and related West African strip weaves appeared in African American pieced strip quilts (figs. 10.26–10.28). The idea of the strip quilt is said to have been a translation of West African handwoven strips. In The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts, John Michael Vlach notes that its "wide distribution makes the strip quilt the most commonplace domestic example of black material culture in the United States. Why a single approach to the task of quilting should be so dominant among Afro-American quilt makers may be traced to the retention of design concepts found in African textiles" (1978,
The former are often pieced together from the smallest possible rectangles of cloth, and the strips are then sewn together just as their African models (Wahlman 1993, 32). The quilts are also said to incorporate other ideas from the West African aesthetic tradition, including the use of "large shapes and strong contrasting colors" and "off-set matching of strips," as well as strips sewn together in "asymmetrical and unpredictable designs" (Wahlman 1993, 35). It is also argued that the varying of small squares and rectangles by size, arrangement, and color is an improvisational strategy that ultimately has its origins in West and Central Africa (Leon 1987), "Flexible patterning," for example, an A-B-C-A-B-C-A-C-B arrangement of design units or strips, again has its counterparts in West Africa and especially in kente (Leon 1987, 40, 41).

According to Maude Wahlman, the "unpredictable rhythms," "variations on a theme," and "improvisation" are traits also "found in other African-American arts such as blues, jazz, black English, and dance" (1993, 48). These arguments are somewhat controversial, but there are nevertheless a seemingly endless number of examples that can be compared favorably with the kente tradition. As opposed to "retentions," there are also deliberate African revivals in African American quilting and a relatively new tradition of actually incorporating handwoven or factory-made kente into contemporary textile arts (see below).

Related to arguments about African influence in the design of African American quilts are the piece-work cloaks (fig. 10.29) of the African American populations of Suriname especially those of the Saramaka peoples (Wahlman 1993, 25). Sally and Richard Price in their influential volume Afro-American Arts of the Suriname Rain Forest recognize the similarity of Maroon "narrow-stripe sewing" to West African cloth, but they argue against any "direct inheritance" of the visual vocabulary based on the lack of evidence for the South American tradition anywhere before the twentieth century (1980, 72, 73). Arguing from silence is always somewhat problematic, but on one level it is irrelevant. Academic conclusions are often at odds with popular beliefs, and many do believe these are African retentions.