The Ghanaian Kaba

Suzanne Gott

Women in southern Ghana's Ashanti Region, especially those living in the cosmopolitan capital of Kumasi, take great pride in their fashionable dress and sense of style. At the center of women's fashion world is the kaba, a three-piece wrapped and sewn ensemble which developed through the creative fusion of indigenous and European elements of female dress (Figure 1.1). While this ensemble is not unique to southern Ghana, this hybrid style does have particular, localized value as a result of the Ghanaian kaba ensemble's unique capacity to simultaneously honor the region's cultural heritage while embracing the ever-changing world of fashion.

The Ghanaian Kaba Ensemble

The Ghanaian kaba is one of the three major types of female ensemble worn in the Ashanti Region. A woman's choice of ensemble depends on the occasion and on her stage of life. For the two-piece dansinkran ensemble, which received its name from the Asante dansinkran hairstyle, women wear two different, yet coordinated cloths for the upper and lower wrapped components. The Asante consider dansinkran to be especially beautiful, expressing time-honored custom and cultural pride. Dansinkran ensembles are worn by Asante queen mothers, elderly women,
and chief mourners at Asante funerals. In contrast, girls and young women usually wear sewn dresses, skirts and tops, or, most recently, pants or jeans and tops. The three-piece kaba ensemble—consisting of a sewn kaba blouse, a sewn or wrapped skirt, and a third cloth that can be wrapped as an overskirt or tied into stylish headgear—remains emblematic of fashionable Asante womanhood.

Within West Africa, the term kaba is applied to three different ensemble styles: the three-piece Ghanaian kaba; the kaba slit dress of Sierra Leone; and the smocked kaba dress style worn in Cameroon. Each of these kaba styles developed through the selective incorporation and local transformation of European elements of female dress. The hybrid nature of these different regional ensembles is reflected in the cross-cultural origins of the term kaba, a word believed to have originated in West Africa’s coastal pidgin trade languages as a local version of the English word cover. The pidgin term kaba reveals an important characteristic shared by each type of kaba, that of covering regions of the female body, particularly women’s breasts, which were not concealed by indigenous one- or two-piece wrapped styles. The efforts of Christian missionaries and the growth of local, mission-educated communities during the nineteenth century were important influences in the development of West African kaba ensembles. The prestige long associated with imported clothing styles and textiles also contributed to the development and appeal of new kaba ensemble styles.

Ghana’s three-piece kaba was created by the addition of a sewn, European-inspired blouse to women’s customary one- or two-piece wrapped ensemble. An early illustration of this combination, pictured in a British woman’s 1852 account of her travels along the West African coast, shows a “Fante mulatto woman” wearing a European-style blouse with the local wrapped skirt and distinctive Fante bustle. Children and descendants of local women and European merchants, some of whom became wealthy, prominent members of Ghana’s coastal trading communities, played an important role in developing and popularizing such hybrid fashions. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the kaba gained increasing popularity among coastal women, as well as being adopted by elite women of certain inland states.

But by the end of the nineteenth century, European dress styles had become the preferred attire for the women of southern Ghana’s new, mission-educated elite, while kaba ensembles were worn by more humble members of these Chris-
tian communities. Soon, the Ghanaian kaba became a mode of dress largely associated with “illiterates,” or women without formal schooling.

However, in the mid-twentieth century, the status of the kaba ensemble rose dramatically as a result of nationalist sentiments that accompanied the 1957 establishment of an independent Ghana free from British colonial rule. The Ghanaian kaba gained new prestige as the “noble national costume” which honored the new nation’s cultural heritage—a status that it retains to the present day. The three-piece kaba also became a fashionable mode of dress for women in other West and Central African countries. Today, Ghanaian women from all walks of life wear kaba ensembles, either on a daily basis or for special occasions such as church, social events, funerals, and weddings.

The Special Value of African-Print Cloth

In Ghana’s Ashanti Region, the special prominence of kaba ensembles in women’s wardrobes is, in no small part, due to the particular esteem and economic worth of the African-print cotton textiles used for the Ghanaian kaba.

The Asante term for the most highly valued category of ensemble fabrics is the word ntoma (cloth), or the English word *cloth*. In the Ashanti Region, the two locally produced forms of ntoma are kente and adinkra. Kente, a handwoven silk, rayon, or cotton strip-cloth historically associated with leadership, remains the most prestigious Asante textile. Adinkra, a cotton textile with hand-stamped designs of deep symbolic meaning, is worn as a special form of mourning cloth. The third and most widely worn category of ntoma is African-print cloth—a distinctive factory-produced cotton textile first developed by nineteenth-century European textile companies specifically for the West and Central African cloth trade (Figure 1.2).

All manufactured fabrics other than African-print cloth are referred to by the English word *material*—an umbrella term for the polyesters, cottons, cotton blends, linens, and rayons that are generally used for the dresses, tops, skirts, and pants favored by girls and younger women. The more culturally valued dansinkran and kaba ensembles—ensembles emblematic of female maturity—are made of the more highly valued ntoma or cloth textiles: kente, adinkra, or African-print cloth. Kaba ensembles of African-print cloth are the primary mode of prestigious female dress.
African-print cloth’s special cultural and economic value, in comparison to all other factory-produced textiles, is the result of this distinctive textile’s unique history. The origins of African-print cloth date back to the early-nineteenth-century efforts of European textile companies to develop factory-produced versions of handcrafted Indonesian batiks, using special manufacturing techniques to imitate the Javanese wax-resist process.

The great success of these factory-made batiks with African consumers prompted late nineteenth-century European manufacturers to establish special Africa departments dedicated to the design, production, and marketing of African-print textiles. These companies sent representatives to West and Central

*Figure 1.2. Madam Theresah Osei, a prominent wholesale and retail trader in African-print textiles, in her downtown shop. Kumasi, Ghana, 2005. Photograph by Suzanne Gott.*
Africa to collect samples of local textiles, as well as to observe and report on different regional cloth preferences. European cloth manufacturers' success in Africa's lucrative yet competitive African-print cloth trade required expert levels of understanding in regard to the visual culture, aesthetic tastes, and symbolic systems of different West and Central African cultures, so these companies also employed local market women specializing in the African-print cloth trade as consultants who could more effectively assess and influence the popularity of new African-print designs.

Ghana's independence from Great Britain in 1957 opened the way for the establishment of Ghanaian African-print cloth factories and the development of more affordable grades of African-print cloth. However, the costly imported wax prints that continued to be produced by certain European textile companies, especially the Dutch manufacturer Vlisco, using long-established African-print designs, have remained the most highly valued form of African-print cloth (Figure 1.3).

In the Ashanti Region, an important trait of African-print cloth that distinguishes this textile from all other manufactured fabrics is that African-print designs have "names"—a characteristic that African-print cloth shares with highly valued, locally crafted kente and adinkra textiles. The Asante, like other Akan-speaking peoples, have a rich heritage of verbal artistry, with the most valued forms of art and visual culture linked to Akan verbal arts by "a name." For this reason, African-print cloth manufacturers and traders have pursued the strategy of bestowing names upon new African-print designs in order to make these cloth designs more appealing to potential customers.

The names given to African-print designs come from a variety of sources. The African-print Bonsu (see Figure 1.1) is said to have been named after an early nineteenth-century Asante king who earned the honorific title "Bonsu" (Whale) after leading the first successful southern military campaign to the coast. The design Odehyee Nsu (A Royal Doesn't Shed Tears) expresses the distinction and privilege of royalty in Asante society. Other African-print designs are named after elements of everyday life, such as two popular designs introduced by European textile companies before 1920: Kwadusa (Bunch of Bananas) and ABC (see Figure 1.3), referring to schooling and literacy.

Proverbial sayings—an especially rich and highly regarded Akan verbal art form and a long-established source of design names for locally produced adinkra
and kente—are a major source of African-print cloth names. The African-print design Akwadaa bɔ nwa is an abridged version of the well-known proverbial saying, Akwadaa bɔ nwa na ɔmmɔ akyekyedee (A child can break the shell of a snail, but cannot break that of a tortoise; i.e., only attempt what is appropriate to your level of ability). Another popular African-print design, Owuo atwedee (The ladder of death [everyone climbs it]), offers a philosophical commentary on the inevitability and equalizing impact of death.

Seemingly straightforward names may have deeper levels of meaning, as in the case of the African-print design Aya (Fern). This design, which originated as an adinkra motif, has a double-edged meaning based on the name’s similarity to the Asante exclamation aya, meaning “I am not afraid of you!” Wearing such an African-print design has the capacity to deliver specific messages or commentaries, in this case perhaps a defiant challenge to a business or marital rival. However, on most occasions, women emphasize that their decision to wear a particular named design is motivated by the desire to convey a more generalized message, based on the widespread consensus that named African-print cloth means “quality.” In the words of one young schoolteacher, “If you put on [African-print] cloth with no name, it is not good cloth. It is important to show people that you have put on good cloth.”

Women living in the Ashanti Region, despite differences in ethnicity, educational background, and financial means, have long been united by a shared interest in acquiring high-quality African-print cloth. It is generally understood that a woman’s personal and interpersonal well-being and success are often evaluated in terms of the number and quality of African-print textiles that she owns and displays by wearing. In the 1980s and 1990s, women reported particularly strong social pressure to wear good-quality African-print kaba ensembles after marrying, and especially after the birth of their first child, with a new mother expected to wear a substantial number of new kaba ensembles of costly imported African-print textiles. As one friend explained, “If you are a young woman who gives birth and are not rich enough to buy [African-print] cloth, then people will laugh at you, saying that you are not of an age to give birth.”

Although the economic difficulties of recent years have forced a relaxation of such requirements, wearing kaba ensembles of high-quality African-print cloth remains an ideal. The capacity of the three-piece kaba ensemble—which requires six yards of African-print cloth for all women, large or small—to clearly com-
municate clothing’s monetary value is considered to be one of the reasons for the continuing popularity of kaba ensembles in the Ashanti Region. Most women are knowledgeable as to the current prices of different grades of locally produced and imported African-print cloth, and the six-yard kaba provides a means of unequivocally displaying the financial worth of women’s African-print ensembles.

The strong linkage between African-print cloth, female maturity, and ideal Asante motherhood is based in the more gender-specific significance of textiles’ status as a valuable, and inviolable, form of female wealth. The general importance of cloth, clothing, and fashionable display in West and Central Africa is based in the historic value of textiles as widely traded commodities and forms of currency. In the Ashanti Region, with its heritage of royal robes of handwoven kente, costly textiles are long-established means of displaying rank, wealth, and prestige. For women, the acquisition and wearing of good-quality textiles, especially African-print cloth, have special significance because of cloth’s customary status as a distinctively female form of property. Unsewn lengths of good-quality African-print cloth, an asset that only increases in value, provide a way of saving for the future or weathering times of financial crisis.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, women were able to invest a significant percentage of their income in costly Dutch wax-print textiles and more affordable factory prints from Ghana, Nigeria, and Côte d’Ivoire. But by the late 1990s, the negative impact of IMF and World Bank Structural Adjustment programs on the Ghanaian economy brought increasing economic hardship that significantly reduced women’s ability to buy imported or even less costly locally produced African-print textiles.

This widespread decline in Ghanaians’ standard of living has brought greater acceptance of inexpensive secondhand clothing imported from Europe and North America as a form of daily dress. However, despite these changes, the African-print kaba ensemble has retained its special status as the most highly regarded form of women’s dress. In the words of one friend, “Kaba is our national custom. It’s our real Ghanaian dress. . . . To dress well is to dress in cloth. To be dressed properly, you must put on cloth.” In the early years of the twenty-first century, affordable African-print cloth once again became available, now produced by Chinese companies whose lower production costs, while undermining Ghana’s own African-print production, also brought a resurgence in women’s ability to wear fashionable kaba ensemble styles (Figure 1.4).

The Ghanaian Kaba
The Ashanti Region’s Dynamic Local Fashion System

In the Ashanti Region, the popular term for fashion or fashionable dressing is the English word ‘style,’ an apparent shortened version of ‘highlife,’ the name coined during the early twentieth century for the prestigious lifestyle and dance-orchestra music of Ghana’s mission-educated elite. ‘High life’ (she likes life, i.e., fashion) and ‘old’s life’ (she is always fashionably dressed) are two phrases commonly used for complimenting a woman’s fashionable style of dress. All women, except the most elderly, are considered to possess a strong interest in fashionable, prestigious dress.

The Ashanti Region’s historic capital of Kumasi, a city of almost a million Asante and non-Asante residents, is home to a dynamic fashion world in which new clothing styles emerge and spread rapidly throughout the city. This dynamic fashion system is fueled by the creative talents of local seamstresses and tailors, the fashionable tastes of Kumasi women, and the ongoing innovations made possible by the local, workshop-based fashion system.

Women most frequently commission their kaba styles from seamstresses, who are generally regarded as being more skilled in sewing fashionable kaba styles. Tailors are considered to excel in sewing dresses, skirts, tops, and pants; however, certain tailors, such as Kumasi tailor James Ado, are also highly skilled in sewing kaba (Figure 13).

Ghana, unlike many other West African countries, has a substantial, well-established seamstress population. The roots of Ghana’s seamstress profession may be traced to the mission-based education system that developed in West Africa during the second half of the nineteenth century. Sewing skills were a basic feature of female education in nineteenth-century Europe and America, and the missionary teachers from Switzerland’s Basel Mission who founded Ghana’s first girls’ schools made sewing instruction a basic part of their educational program. At first, sewing was taught within the extended households that served as the missionaries’ earliest educational settings. Sewing instruction became part of the formal curriculum following the opening of girls’ boarding schools in the 1880s. Many early photographs show Basel Mission teachers and students gathered around sewing baskets, at work on their sewing projects. Students began by learning the basics—how to sew various stitches neatly and in a straight line. As pupils advanced, they increased their sewing skills by making different kinds of sam-

Figure 1.4 Mrs. Monica Boadi wearing a new kaba ensemble of African print cloth manufactured in China. Kumasi, Ghana, 2007. Photograph by Suzanne Grot.
To become a successful seamstress, or tailor, in contemporary Ghana requires good sewing and business skills, as well as the ability to stay abreast of the latest fashion trends. Seamstresses and tailors must also be good teachers, because sewing workshops operate according to the apprentice system, which provides training for the profession (see Figure 1.3). In exchange for their students’ labor, seamstresses and tailors are responsible for the proper training of the apprentices under their supervision.

Beginning apprentices learn different sewing skills, often by sewing with inexpensive recycled paper. As apprentices acquire more skills, they are given simple and later more difficult steps to complete in sewing a client’s ensemble. Cloth is expensive, so only the seamstress, tailor, or a senior apprentice is permitted to actually cut a customer’s cloth. Ghanaian seamstresses and tailors practice the “freehand” method of clothing construction. They don’t use a pattern in cutting and constructing a garment but rely on their tape measure and expertise to ensure that the garment will be a success.

Accomplished seamstresses, such as Mrs. Victoria Dadie and Mrs. Christina Boakye (Figures 1.6 and 1.7), pride themselves on their knowledge of the latest fashionable kaba styles and on their skill in creating their own stylistic innovations. In Kumasi, women distinguish between two basic categories of kaba ensembles, simple and complicated styles. Most women tend to have their better-quality African-print cloth sewn in a simple kaba style that can remain in fashion for two or three years (see Figures 1.1–1.3). Complicated or fancy styles are more distinctive styles that will remain fashionable for only a relatively short period of time (see Figure 1.4). The added expense of a complicated kaba style due to the quantity of decorative materials that are often used, as well as the extra labor involved in sewing such elaborate styles, adds to the prestige of these distinctive, short-lived styles.

When women take their African-print cloth to a seamstress, there are several ways that they can order a new kaba style. Sometimes a client may bring in a kaba ensemble to be copied. In the 1980s and 1990s, seamstresses attracted customers by displaying finished garments outside their shops, sometimes on “fashionable lady” plywood hangers created and sold by local sign painters. Seamstresses also might display full-sized sewn paper versions of the latest kaba blouse styles. Clients could then mix and match elements of the different paper kahas—choosing...
the neckline of one and the sleeve style of another. Since the late 1990s, new kaba styles are increasingly inspired by the colorful fashion posters that are now produced in Ghana and other West African countries (see Figure 17). Women may also leave the choice of kaba style up to a trusted seamstress or tailor by simply asking that they “sew a nice style.” A kaba ensemble is judged to be an artistic success when the seamstress, or tailor, achieves a harmonious balance between ensemble style, cloth design, and the personality of the individual client.

The Ghanaian Kaba: Fashion That Sustains Culture

In contemporary Ghana, the fashionable lifestyles associated with virtually all women continues to find its most valued expression in the three-piece kaba—the “real national costume,” combining culturally and economically valued Af-
appearances. Since her husband wouldn’t be able to do so because the man’s toga ensemble was too awkward for daily wear, she would “be dressing in cloth for both of us.”

The continuing popularity of women’s kaba ensembles, particularly within the Ashanti Region, is inextricably linked to the role of textiles, especially good-quality African-print cloth, as an important form of female wealth. The inclusion of African-print cloth in the same valued textile category as handcrafted kente and adinkra is the result of this textile’s particular history. Although initially developed and produced by European-based textile manufacturers, the commercial success of African-print cloth was the result of these foreign companies’ concerted efforts to meet the standards and tastes of their African customers. The marketing of African-print cloth in Ghana’s Ashanti Region and other Akan areas has also required European, African, and, most recently, Chinese textile companies to produce African-print designs with culturally meaningful “names” in order to satisfy the verbal visual aesthetic of Asante and other Akan peoples.

Women’s development of the three-piece Ghanaian kaba ensemble, perhaps as early as the sixteenth or seventeenth century, created a new mode of dress with the capacity to satisfy the seemingly contradictory needs of cultural continuity and fashionable innovation. The addition of a sewn, initially European-inspired blouse to women’s indigenous one- or two-piece wrapped style resulted in an ensemble that, by the mid-twentieth century, could meet Ghanaian women’s growing desire to express nationalist pride as well as fashionable modernity. The hybrid sewn and wrapped kaba ensemble provided women with a more practical, wearable form of customary dress than men’s wrapped and comparatively ungainly customary ensemble. The kaba ensemble’s seven components—the kaba blouse and, more recently, the sewer skirt—also substantially increased the fashion potential of women’s previously wrapped styles.

In today’s Ashanti Region, especially the capital city of Kumasi, women’s kaba ensembles remain the center of a dynamic, locally based fashion world that presents an alternative to Western views of fashion as a system in which stylistic innovations are introduced, or imposed, from above. Instead, new styles and fashion trends originate at the grassroots level, within a commissioning process that enables fashion-conscious Kumasi women to enlist the expertise and creative skills of local seamstresses and tailors. The creation and wearing of stylish new kaba ensembles of African-print cloth, with their successful blend of cultural heritage and fashionable innovation, reveal the cultural vitality and longstanding sophistication of this distinctive West African fashion system.