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Textiles in Ghana

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First published 2024.

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Introduction

Introduction

This course looks at the way meanings and values are assigned to textiles. You will examine how a piece of cloth can define wealth, status, and, in the past, office.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which meanings and values are assigned to textiles
- understand the changing history of the making of *kente* and *adinkra*
- discuss the role of the market place in the changing history of *kente* and *adinkra* making.

1 The meanings and values of textiles in Ghana

This course looks at three kinds of textile used and marketed in Kumasi and its surrounding towns in Ghana – the hand-made textiles of *kente* and *adinkra* and industrially produced waxed cottons – in order to consider meanings and values assigned to them.

The course revolves around a series of video clips originally produced for the course A216 *Art and its histories*. The Course Team filmed at the market in Kumasi as well as at Bonwire, which is a centre for *kente* weaving, at Ntonso, where *adinkra* is made, and at Wonoo. The latter three towns are close to Kumasi.

The course requires you to watch short segments of video and pause to assess what has been discussed and further consider its significance. The course will guide you in an exploration of the following themes:

- Theme 1: The status of cloth-making

  How is the making of *kente* and *adinkra* cloth regarded in Ghana? (What is its status?) By what criteria are the various cloths judged? How do you think those with Eurocentric views might regard cloth-making?

- Theme 2: Tradition and modernity

  Western stereotypical views of traditional art practices in 'other' cultures have tended to see these as sterile and static art forms. How is this view challenged by the video?

- Theme 3: Gender and values

  How would you interpret the significance of women's participation in kente cloth making? (For example, might this suggest a new trend and value being added?) What evidence might you find in the video to suggest that women (and, by extension, women's work) were regarded as belonging to the domestic sphere and stereotyped as 'other' by the men?

- Theme 4: Collaborative and independent work practices

  Which textile did you consider to be made more collaboratively? How might this distinction bear upon western views of the status of the cloth-makers concerned?

These themes are further explored in A216, which includes many other examples. The free OpenLearn course A216_1 The Louvre Museum is also taken from A216, and you might find it interesting.

Textiles from Ghana is structured as a series of activities, each associated with a video clip. In addition to watching the clips, you'll be asked to tackle a number of questions that should help you clarify your thoughts and understanding of the material presented on the clips. You might like to consider taking notes using, for example, your Learning Journal on OpenLearn. Also, you might like to share your ideas in a forum.

2 Definitions

2.1 *Kente*

Section 2 introduces you to cloth making in Ghana. In particular, you'll learn the basics about *kente* and *adinkra*, the two main techniques used.

Activity 1

Once you've watched the video, explain, in your own words, what *kente* is.

Video content is not available in this format.



What is Kente?

2.2 *Adinkra*

Activity 2

Once you've watched the video, use your own words to explain what *adinkra* is.

Video content is not available in this format.



What is Adinkra?

2.3 Making *kente*

Activity 3

Once you've watched the video, explain how *kente* is made.

Video content is not available in this format.

How is Kente made?

2.4 The manufacture of *kente*

Activity 4

Once you've watched the video, describe the materials used in the manufacturing of *kente*.

Video content is not available in this format.

What materials are used?

2.5 Making *adinkra*

Activity 5

Once you've watched the video, explain how *adinkra* is made.

Video content is not available in this format.

How is Adinkra made?

2.6 Questions

Now that you've been introduced to *kente* and *adinkra*, you might like to think about the questions in the activity below. The purpose of these questions is to encourage you to think about the broader issues and themes mentioned in Section 2. Later on you will have

more information to go on, but it is worth noting what you can now and generating some first thoughts in relation to these questions.

Activity 6

Consider the following questions:

- What information have you gleaned so far about the two different techniques and their relative status?
- How do they compare in terms of function and status, media, and processes or working patterns?
- How time consuming are they?
- What sorts of skill are buyers purchasing?

These are my preliminary comments:

Function/status

Kente is associated with important occasions, but it is linked especially with high social office and is more of a wealthy person's status symbol. *Adinkra* is associated with funerals and thus important occasions in the lives of everyone.

Kente is designed to be felt ('beautiful', like silk) as well as for appearance. *Adinkra* is designed to be looked at.

Media

Kente uses imported rayons. *Adinkra* requires local materials for the dyes. (An additional piece of information, which we were not able to give you on film, is that the pieces of cotton used by *adinkra* dyers are now imported cloths.)

Ways of making *kente* and *adinkra* have shifted and continue to shift. We were told that *kente* weavers had first used cotton and vegetable dyes, then bought silks from European traders, and then had begun using rayon. The most recent introduction is the use of lurex to achieve 'glitter'. While Kojo Fosu had talked only of vegetable dyes being used for *adinkra*, we saw cloths that had black-stamped designs on red and blue grounds hanging up in the workshop. (The older technique on the black ground was also demonstrated.)

Processes/time involved

Kente is very time consuming to produce, with one strip of the best cloth taking at least a day to make. We were told that there were grades of skill: only 10 per cent of workmen are able and willing to make some difficult designs. So far it looks as if *kente* weaving is more in the control of one man. (In the past, when *kente* thread was homespun, it would have involved more collaboration.) *Adinkra* takes several weeks to make and involves the input of dyer, stamp carver, and printer in a collaborative process.

With *kente* the decisions and exact calculations take place right at the start, before the weaving begins. The design and colour choices must be thought out before warping up the loom, and the plan must then be steadily and accurately followed through with no changes.

Adinkra depends on a lengthy dyeing process (of six dippings) to obtain the depth and evenness of hue. It requires precision, speed, and decisiveness at the printing stage. Design activity is concentrated towards the end of the making process.

> ***What is being bought?***
> In both cases, the buyer is acquiring skilful design and execution.

3 Making

3.1 The people who make *kente*

In Section 3 you will learn more about the people who make *kente* and *adinkra*.

Activity 7

Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on what you learnt about the people who make *kente*.

Video content is not available in this format.

Who Makes Kente?

3.2 The people who make *adinkra*

Activity 8

Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on what you learnt about the people who make *adinkra*.

Video content is not available in this format.

Who makes Adinkra?

3.3 Training to weave *kente*

Activity 9

Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on how the *kente* weavers train.

Video content is not available in this format.

How do Kente weavers train?

3.4 Training to make *adinkra*

Activity 10

Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on how the makers of *adinkra* train.

Video content is not available in this format.

How do makers of Adinkra train?

3.5 What can we learn?

The next activity poses a question that should encourage you to bring together the various observations you made above.

Activity 11

What can we learn from who is trained and the way people train to make *kente* and *adinkra* about the respective values assigned to the cloths?

Kente

Kente weaving can be done by someone very young, although it was stressed that designing *kente* was only possible for a mature master weaver. *Kente* might be made in a workshop with groups of workers or singly by a master weaver working for himself. *Kente* is now being taught to young women.

Weaving seems to have connections with those of high social status. For example, the Nana Asante Frimpong, Member of Parliament for the Wonoo area, worked his way through college using his *kente*-making skills to finance him. *Kente* cloths range in value according to whether an acknowledged master has made them. *Kente* is related to complex and variable patterns of making, and seems to be profitable enough to warrant large-scale production.

Adrinkra

Adinkra-making, by way of contrast, seems to have a more modest status than *kente* weaving. It is organised solely on a family basis, with boys learning from their fathers, and members of the household performing different tasks. Gender divisions seem to be in place in *adinkra*-making.

(A further point, which we learned of on our visit but could not film, is that *kente* costs a good deal more to buy than *adinkra*. *Kente* is so expensive that hire purchase arrangements are on offer. As the proper clothing for mourning, *adinkra* needs to be affordable to many people.)

4 Using

4.1 The functions of *kente*

In Section 4 you will learn about the many uses of *kente* and *adinkra*.

Activity 12

Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on what you learnt about the functions of *kente*.

Video content is not available in this format.

What are the functions of Kente?

4.2 The meaning of *kente* designs

Activity 13

Once you've watched the video, explain, using your own words, what *kente* designs mean.

Video content is not available in this format.

What do Kente designs mean?

4.3 The functions of *adinkra*

Activity 14

Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on what you learnt about the functions of *adinkra*.

Video content is not available in this format.

What are the functions of Adinkra?

4.4 The meanings of *adinkra*

Activity 15

Once you've watched the video, make some notes on what you've learnt about the meanings of *adinkra*.

Video content is not available in this format.

What are the meanings of Adinkra?

4.5 Questions

The final activity in this section asks you to bring together the observations you'll have made after watching each section of video.

Activity 16

Consider the following questions:

1. Can you list some of the ways in which speakers described *kente* and *adinkra* being used?
2. Note down some of the meanings assigned – sometimes several to one design.
3. Note how new designs arise and some of the new designs mentioned.

Kente

1. *Kente* is worn for special occasions of all sorts, including funeral commemoration services. In this case, the colours considered suitable are white and black or white and blue. Some types of cloth were considered more suitable for women. *Kente* is associated with high office, and some designs, involving extreme skill to weave, are exclusive to the Asante chief (the Asantehene). We

were told that African-American students wear *kente* for graduation in national colours (black, green, and burgundy).

2. A design called Obaa Kofo Mmu Man (meaning ‘One man does not govern’, ‘Two heads are better than one’ after local proverbs) has been renamed Fatia after the wife of the first president of Ghana, but the design is also still called by its earlier name. Each of the component designs on a woven strip are named, as well as the design as a whole. The design called Adwenisi Adwenisu or ‘Design upon design’ indicates superlative skill and the use of more thread.
3. New designs are being invented. It is up to the weaver to use his ‘imagination’ in combining patterns.

(You may like to think about the zig-zag motif of Adwenisi Adwenisu and the way this was interpreted (note the passing reference to women). Might you draw on this as you consider Theme 3 above?)

Adinkra

1. *Adinkra* is worn for funeral commemorations and mourning. Black is chosen by family members, although the chief mourners wear red. Men wear a single cloth while women wear three.
2. The *adinkra* stamps have different names. These include ‘Except the Lord’ (meaning without the help of God nothing is possible); ‘King of the Symbols’ the ‘Sankofa’ bird (meaning ‘Go back to your roots’); ‘You cannot tell the good from the bad’. These designs are interpreted in different ways as applying to the wearer’s life or to other events. (The family mourners we interviewed at Kumasi explained they were wearing an *adinkra* symbol (rams’ horns, invented as a symbol for victory in war) to indicate the Christian victory of life over death won by their recently dead father.)

   Adinkra designs have been taken over by industrial manufacturers of printed cloth.
3. The new designs mentioned were ‘Change your life’; a new design for the Sankofa bird; a symbol for ‘Enemies round me’ (meaning that whether you are good or bad you always have enemies).

(Note: you might ponder over the relationship between the worded meanings assigned to kente and adinkra and the issues of status and modernity – Themes 1 and 2 above. Consider, for example, the tone of the examples given, their educational/moral content. Might this have something to do with the status of these cloths? Then reflect on the nature of proverbs and what these might suggest to western writers about the tradition of cloth-making in Ghana.)

5 History

5.1 History of *kente*

Activity 17

Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on what you learnt about the history of *kente*.

Video content is not available in this format.



What is the history of Kente?

5.2 History of *adinkra*

Activity 18

Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on what you learnt about the history of *adinkra*.

Video content is not available in this format.



What is the history of Adinkra?

5.3 Addressing the issues

Activity 19

Think back over the video evidence so far: what information and examples might you select, and how might you use these to address the issues raised there?

You will find the final section of the programme about the marketing of cloth also contains relevant points, especially in relation to themes 1, 2, and 4 above.

6 Selling

6.1 Marketing cloth in Ghana

The market in Kumasi is arguably one of the largest in West Africa, and mostly anything can be found there, including lots of cloth. In this section you will learn about the marketing and selling of cloth in Ghana and, in particular, in Kumasi market.

Activity 20

Once you've watched the video, make a few notes on how cloth is marketed in Ghana.

Video content is not available in this format.



Marketing cloth

6.2 The marketing of prints in Kumasi market

Activity 21

Once you've watched the video, make some notes on the marketing of wax prints and fancy prints in Kumasi market.

Video content is not available in this format.



Wax Prints and fancy prints in Kumasi market

7 Conclusion

Here are a few summary points to help you, in particular, with your thinking about Themes 1 and 2 above. As a further exercise, you might like to identify examples from the course to illustrate these points.

The making of *kente* and *adinkra* represent important art forms in Ghana, and cloth in general is highly valued. The video gives an indication of the previous development of cloth-making and the sense that it is ongoing, whether in terms of new materials, new meanings, changing functions, new ways of working, or new designs. Since the sixteenth century, European views of art have tended to label textile-making as a craft. In addition, those with Eurocentric assumptions may associate traditional crafts with skills that are unchanging and old-fashioned.

Acknowledgements

This course was written by Professor Cath King

Academic Consultants: Catherine King; John Picton, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; additional advice was given by Malika Kraamer, Erasmus University, Rotterdam and School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

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