

New Paradigms in Ghanaian Royal Ceremonial Clothing

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Abstract

Ghanaian Royal ceremonial clothing have been made of woven fabric for centuries. Kente is deemed to be used by royals in about six regions in the country; Ashanti, Eastern, Brong Ahafo, Western and Volta region. These cloths are used on all occasions such as durbars and special gatherings. There are other fabrics also found in Ashanti and other Akan speaking regions such as Kuntunkuni, Adinkra prints, Kobene, Brisi and Nwomu. All these cloths are used for funerals with the exception of Nwomu which is versatile in use. There is a paradigm shift from the use of these traditional royal cloths to the newly introduced embroidered cloth for kings and chiefs in the country. This paper seeks to bring to fore the history, characteristics and production processes of embroidered cloth in Ghana. It is also to investigate the rationale behind the shift from Kente and other traditional cloth to embroidered cloth by traditional rulers and the elite class in Ghana and beyond. Relevant data for the study were solicited using interviews and observation from chiefs, opinion leaders, embroidery designers, weavers and cloth traders in Ntonso, Adanwomase, Asawase and its environs in the Ashanti region of Ghana. The outcome of this study revealed that embroidery designed cloth, as produced by the people of Ntonso and other communities have unique features which identify the kings and chiefs by the art and symbols. This immensely contributes to the socio-economic, cultural, political and development of Ghana.

Keywords: *Royal cloth, Nwomu, Embroidered cloth, Kente, Traditional symbol*

Introduction

Kente, nwomu, adinkra, kobene and brisi have been cloths produced by the Asante people of Ghana since time immemorial. Kente has been a leading royal cloth until recently, on which totems, symbols and other designs are now boldly embroidered and used by the elite classes. This new cloth design is gradually making waves in traditional royal cloths in Ghana. Royal clothing according to Microsoft Encarta (2009) is used synonymously with regalia or royal insignia as the ceremonial and symbolic objects used and worn by royalty or other holders of high office on formal occasions. It can also be related to distinctive clothing, splendid attire or strappings showing the status of a group of people, worn especially on formal occasions. Royal clothing all over the world have been elaborate and stunning, and reflect the power ranking in the society. It is a taboo for anyone else to wear the same or similar cloth with a chief on an occasion. (Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion, 2005). In Ghana, Kente has been the royal cloth in six regions until recently where embroidered cloth is gaining the upper hand. The traditional Kente cloth was mostly used by royals for festive occasions such as festivals, durbars and other ceremonies.

Embroidery, according to Justin, (n.d) is the art or handicraft of decorating fabric or other materials with needle and thread/yarn. Agarwal (2010), agrees that, embroidery is an art which involves needle along with yarn or thread in its making process. According to him, besides needle and thread, it is also possible to use other types of materials that include pearls, metal strips, quills, sequins and beads. According to embroidery-help-guide (unknown author), embroidery is also related to an ancient variety of decorative needlework in which designs and pictures are created by stitching strands of some material onto a layer of another material. For production, most embroidery use thread or wool stitched onto a woven fabric, but the stitches could be executed in, for example, wire or leather strands, and embroidery can be worked onto many materials. The help-guide further explains that, embroidery may be done either by hand or machine. The objectives of the study are to bring to the fore the history, characteristics and production processes of embroidered cloth in Ghana. It is also to investigate the rationale behind the shift from Kente and other traditional cloth to embroidered cloth by traditional rulers and the elite class in Ghana and beyond.

Methodology

Ashanti has rich traditions and culture of which clothing plays a major role. Based on this fact, Ntonso, Tewobaabi, Adanwomase, Manhyia, Asafo, Asem, and Kejetia markets in the Ashanti region were sampled for the study. These communities were sampled because of their predominant contributions to the fabric design industry in Ghana. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the various locations and persons for the study; this gave the researchers opportunity to do targeted sampling for quick results (Crossman, 2018). In this study, descriptive research was used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena, describing “what exists” with respect to variables or conditions in a situation (Key, 1997). Under the descriptive research, a developmental study was employed to determine the development and production processes of embroidered cloths. The study considered the base fabric, preparation, design, techniques in the production and the finishing of the cloths. The developmental study was also used to describe the relationship between the old and current approaches of producing Royal cloth especially the Kente and current embroidered cloth. The Ntonsu, Tewobaabi and Kejetia communities were visited to ascertain the origin and production processes of the new embroidered cloth. Interviews and observation were used to obtain data from the field. Interview was used to establish and understand the current methodology of embroidered cloth production. It was also used to solicit information on the reasons for the shift from Kente cloth to the embroidered cloth by traditional leaders.

Observation helped to follow the sequential process in the making of the embroidered cloths; Images and videos of chiefs and elders at durbars and festivals were also observed. Data gathered was analyzed using the comparative analysis approach.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Comparison of Unique Characteristics of Kente Design and Embroidered Cloth

Kente cloth has been the ultimate cloth for royals in Ghana for decades. Inspired by the mythological spider of Bonwire, the cloth is woven in richly coloured and intricately patterned design (Badoe, 2014). It is woven into strips, maximum of seven inches in width and five inches per design in the strip and joined together lengthways to form the cloth. According to (Badoe, 2014), the motifs and designs of the Kente cloth have names with philosophical meanings and colour symbolism that serve as a medium of communication to the indigenes. These designs often have sharp edges and regular shapes such that it is difficult to achieve circular motif through weaving. Furthermore, the strip nature of the cloth makes it also difficult to achieve bolder designs. This could be as a result of the picking process during weaving. Thus, the smaller the width, the easier it is to 'pick' the warp to achieve the desired effect of the design.

The embroidered cloth technique unlike the Kente employs the embroidery machine in the making of designs. Adinkra and other symbols some of which are circular are boldly embroidered on the cloth. The use of Adinkra symbols have remarkable importance because Frimpong *et al* (2013) explain that, Adinkra symbols express various themes that relate to the history, beliefs and philosophy of the people of Ashanti. According to them, these symbols have rich proverbial meanings, since proverbs play important roles in the Ashanti society.

Traditional symbols such as totems which are directly related to particular ethnic groups are boldly embroidered in the fabrics. In this way, it becomes very easy to identify motif with its people or origin. Unlike Kente which is woven and used by most Ghanaians across the country, the embroidered cloths with boldly embroidered traditional symbols are reserved for royals.

The Origin of Embroidered Cloth in Ghana

Embroidery designs have been in existence in Ghana for many years. According to Nana Kwaku Duah II-Tewobaabihene (Personal communication, 28th July, 2018), embroidery used to be done on garments such as dresses, fugu, kaftan, 'jumpa' shirts, kaba and slit among others. In terms of traditional cloth, embroidery technique was used to fix images or motifs onto cloth to form applique. These kinds of cloth according to Nana Kwaku Duah II were called Atitiriw Ntoma (the Achievers Cloth) and it was mostly designed for warriors and chiefs. This confirms Kudowor's (2012) assertion that, the Fante people of Central and Western coast of Ghana used to produce a cloth called Akunintoma (the cloth of the great or achievers). Kudowor explained further that, such cloths are characterized by applique or embroidered motifs of cultural importance, usually historical and made out of colourful imported fabrics sewn onto larger fabrics. The motifs had specific messages related to the exploits, strength and achievements of the one it is made for. It was made to honor great warriors and leaders of the Asafo companies which were originally formed along the lines of the brigades. Kudowor further intimated that, unlike Kente, Akunintoma was won by

only clan heads, royals and leaders in the society for special occasions and later became an adopted celebratory cloth by the Ga's in Ghana. The Akunintoma was worn only by royals and affluent in society and were produced only for males and for celebratory purposes only.

According to Nana Kwaku Duah II (also known in private life as Baafour Gyimah), he introduced the embroidery technique into cloth design in 1992. His exploits in textiles has earned him a prestigious award as the Creative Chief and Master Weaver Extraordinaire (Personal communication, 28th, July, 2018). In July 2009, an elaborate embroidered cloth was presented to President Obama when he visited Ghana, thereafter, the cloth has been called "Obama" to date.

Embroidered cloth design

The inspiration for embroidered cloth design used to be the Adinkra symbols of Asante. However, due to the acceptance of the cloth by most traditional leaders in the country, it is now made of various traditional symbols such as totems, clan or ethnic symbols with few additions of elements of design as shown in (Plates 1 and 2). In embroidered cloth designing, the symbols are selected based on the theme the designer is working with or the customer's demand. The cloth is however dominated by Adinkra symbols when it is to be sold on the open market. The motifs (traditional symbols) are usually arranged in full drop, half drop or rectilinear manner as in (Plates 1 and 2). The symbols express various philosophies, history, beliefs etc. of the ethnic groups of the Chiefs and elders. Selecting symbols to complement a particular design needs to be well thought through since the meaning of a symbol may affect the philosophy of that design.



Plate 1: Arrangement of *Adinkra* and traditional symbols in embroidered cloth



Plate 2: Arrangement of *Adinkra* and traditional symbols with selected elements of design in embroidered cloth

Embroidered cloth can also be designed by combining Kente strips or Nwomu. In this case, the embroidery designs will alternate the Kente strips or Nwomu designs

Embroidery Processes and Techniques used for Embroidered Cloth

The embroidered cloth is made with two main fabrics namely; plain traditional woven fabric and khaki fabric. Both fabrics are used as the base fabric for embroidered cloth. Mostly, the plain traditional woven fabrics are used for royal or expensive designs. According to Nana Kwaku Duah II (Personal Communication, 28th July, 2018), the embroidered cloth

designs could be made directly on fabrics and the fabrics fused with vilene. Cloth designers who are able to make the embroidery designs directly on the fabric are deemed to be very experienced.

The required size of base cloth is obtained/made before the design patterns are embroidered on the cloth. The existing cloth come in yardages ranging from eight (8), ten (10) and twelve (12) yards. When the base cloth includes Kente or Nwomu, they are made in strips and incorporated to form the required yardage (Plates 4 and 5). The outlines of the patterns are transferred to the base fabric by tracing with pen or screen printed (Plates 6, 7 and 8) using very faint dyes/print paste. Hereafter, chain stitch embroidery machine is used to first sew the outline (Plates 6 and 7) of the patterns on the base fabric before filling in the spaces as required (Plate 3).



Plate 3: Creating motifs on the stiffened fabric with embroidery machine



Plate 4: Joining *kente* strips and embroidered pieces



Plate 5: Embroidered cloth with *Kente* design



Plate 6: Creating motifs on non-stiffened fabric using embroidery machine



Plate 7: Creating monochromatic embroidery designs on cloth



Plate 8: A completed *Kente* and embroidered cloth blend

The Paradigm Shifts from Kente to Embroidered Cloth

The choice of embroidered cloth by kings, paramount chiefs and traditional leaders in Ghana these days is as a results of many factors. From the interviews conducted, embroidered cloth is the fashion of the moment. Nana Kwaku Duah II (and corroborated by other designers) intimated that traditional rulers are currently interested in embroidered cloth more than the traditional Kente cloth. This is as a result of the opportunity of designers to incorporate traditional symbols such as totems and emblems as seen in (Plates 10 and 13). They explained that, every chief wants to be known by his or her traditional symbol and therefore prefer embroidered cloth which clearly portray this to that of Kente or other cloths. It was also noted that, the cloth is heavier than other traditional cloths which is preferable because heavy cloths drape better. Embroidered cloth also comes with more attractive and

brighter colours pleasing to the eyes. Moreover, colours of a particular traditional area can be easily used in embroidered cloth that significantly identifies the user with his/her origin. A typical example is the use of green, gold and black which symbolizes the Ashanti Kingdom. Information gathered from the designers indicated that, the production time for one embroidered cloth is far lesser than traditional Kente. For example, it was indicated that, it takes a month or two to complete men's Kente cloth depending on the design whereas it takes one to two weeks to complete a complicated embroidered men's cloth. For women's cloth, it takes two weeks to a month to complete one Kente cloth whereas between three days to one week is required for ladies embroidered cloth. In terms of pricing, the value of traditional Kente costs far higher than that of embroidered cloth. This is due to the time spent on the production of Kente as compared with embroidered cloth.

These and other factors explain the paradigm shift from the patronage of traditional Kente cloth to embroidered cloth by Ghanaian traditional rulers. (Plates 10 to 15) testify to the growing popularity of embroidered cloth by traditional rulers. The cloth is also gaining popularity among political figures such H.E. the President (Plate 9) and Ghana's entertainment personality (Plate 15).



Plate 9: H.E. Nana Addo Danquah Akufo-Addo in a blend of *Kente* and Embroidered cloth



Plate 10: Otumfoo Osei Tutu II in Embroidered cloth with totems and emblems.



Plate 11: Togbe Afede (the Agbemefia of Asogli State Volta Region) in a blend of *Kente* and Embroidered cloth



Plate 12: Otumfoo Osei Tutu II in fully Embroidered cloth at Jubilee House 2018



Plate 13: Osagyefo Amoatia Oforipanyin I in blended Nwomu and Embroidered cloth with totem and emblems



Plate 14: Otumfuo Osei Tutu II in a blend of Nwomu and Embroidered cloth

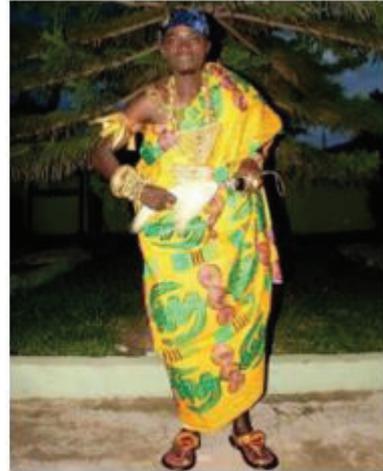


Plate 15: Lilwin (a popular Ghanaian movie star) and Nkosohene in Embroidered cloth

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study discussed embroidered cloth, its unique characteristics, history and production. It also compared the design and unique characteristics of embroidered cloth to the long standing Kente cloth. The production processes of embroidered cloth and combination of Kente and embroidered cloth; as well as Nwomu and embroidered cloth were also discussed.

The cloths are very colourful, heavy, easier to construct and have realistic or readable symbols representing specific ethnic groups and clans of the society. At Ntonso (the origin of embroidered cloths in Ashanti) the business of embroidered cloth has overshadowed other cloth production and business such as Kente weaving, Nwomu and Adinkra printing.

The interest in embroidered cloth is currently high but the designers are few. This can be solved by setting up training center's in communities where embroidered cloths are made to encourage the youth to learn, set up and own craft shops. Moreover, unlike Kente weaving that has been left to few communities in the country, the embroidered cloth (which also goes by the name "Obama") can be industrialized to make cloths for a wider category of people based on their own themes, preferences and financial strengths.

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