

# The Influence Of European Elements On Asante Kente

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*Abstract: The Asante Kente has undergone several changes due to the impacts of some European elements. These impacts are greatly seen in the tools and materials, production techniques, as well as concepts or ideologies in the design of the Asante textiles. There are both merits and demerits of these impacts of the European elements. It appears that the impacts of these European elements on the Asante Kente have not been critically examined as to whether they are reflecting negatively or positively on the rich Kente heritage of the Asantes of Ghana. The study was therefore conducted to examine the impacts of the European elements so as to advise on what aspects of the European elements that needs to be discontinued and the aspects to be promoted. The researchers gathered data from primary and secondary sources by way of personal interviews, administration of questionnaires, as well as observation. The results of the study have been presented under the following headings: Analysis of the research instruments, main findings (primary and secondary data), Interpreting the data, answering of research questions, conclusions and recommendations. This involved investigating and examining the extent to which the Asante Kente have been impacted by these European elements, thus, the positive impacts and how they have ensured the improvement of the Asante textile industry and the negative impacts and how they have adversely affected the Asante Kente industry. The study revealed the beneficiary aspects of the impacts and discusses how they can be harnessed for the development of the Kente industry in Ashanti. However, the study pointed out the negative aspects that would endanger the progress of the Asante Kente industry which have to be discontinued. Suggestions and recommendations on how to effectively implement these impacts from Europe to ensure the success and improvement of the Asante Kente industry have been fully discussed.*

*Keywords: European elements, Motif, European Influences, Culture, Kente, Asantes*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Textiles play a very quintessential role in the life of man. Its vibrant aspect, clothing, makes life bearable and without it life would be very uncomfortable. More importantly, the textile of a particular ethnic society aids in their identification and distinction from other ethnic societies. Thus, the culture of a people is partially portrayed through their clothing they put on and/or the textiles they produce for sale. Akenoo (2002) concurs that aside from textiles giving identity to an ethnic society or nation, clothing helps us in understanding the beliefs, ideologies and accepted norms governing the lives of a group of people. Textiles also advances and enhances the

image of a country. Clothing plays a very important role in the development and transmission of any culture in the world. Formally in Asante, the type of cloth that one put on helped someone to know the age group, sex, social status etc of the wearer (Osei, 2000; Adom, 2005, 2010). The Kente cloth of the Asantes had symbolic woven patterns in them which had cultural interpretations and significance that educated the younger generation of their culture. The situation has however changed. A preliminary survey conducted by the researchers in various parts of Ashanti revealed that most of the textile fabrics produced today and even some Kente clothes have woven patterns that do not carry any cultural or historical interpretation about the culture of the Asantes. This is largely

due to the influence of some European elements such as European culture, European textile tools, materials and machinery for textile production, European textile production techniques, European textile products and concepts of design. This paper analyzed the rich Kente in Asante and the influence that the European elements have on it. It examines these influences from Europe and outlines both the negative and the positive influences. Remedies to curb these negative influences from Europe on the Kente done in Ashanti today have been suggested. Suggestions have also been given to Kente producers on how they can utilize the positive aspects of the European elements so as to improve and enhance the Kente produced in Ashanti today.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The research design employed by the researchers in carrying out the research was the qualitative research design. The researchers used this research approach to help him collect an extensive amount of verbal data from a small number of participants through personal interview, Close-ended questionnaire and participant observation (West, 1981). The collected data was organized into small forms that give coherence. Verbal descriptions were used to portray the situation studied. Interpretative narratives were constructed from the data to capture the complexity of the phenomena under study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The descriptive research method was used for the study. The researchers decided to use the elements of this research method to assist him vividly describe the chain of events about the influence of European elements on Asante Kente witnessed at the study centres thus, Bonwire and Kumasi Cultural Centre to enable him decipher the influence of European elements on the Asante Kente. This accounted for the use of the descriptive study for the research. The population for the study was Kente weavers at the study centre thus Bonwire and Kumasi Cultural Centre. Purposive sampling was implemented for the selection of the sample for the study. Fifteen skilled masters and Thirty-five apprentices were deliberately selected and interviewed because they were seen to help immensely in realizing the objectives laid out for the study (Kumekpor, 2002). Participant observations, personal and structured interviews as well as close-ended questionnaire were the main instrumentations that were used for soliciting the required data for the study. The researchers also took part in the activities witnessed at Bonwire and the Kumasi Cultural Centre such as laying of warp yarns, preparation of weft, selection of tools and materials as well as creation of the weave patterns. This aided him in gleaning detailed information about the influence of European elements on the Asante Kente. Also, the researchers used the structured form of interview in addition to the participant observation to assist him get the exact data to help him in answering the research questions for the study. The researchers implemented the data analysis spiral that employs the interpretivist theory to analyze the data for the study. The data was first organized by arranging the specific facts in a logical or chronological order. Large amounts of text was broken down into smaller units such as sentences, stories etc. Then, the entire data was perused severally to get the sense of

what it contains as a whole. Preliminary interpretations of the organized data were made. The data was classified or grouped into common categories or themes. Meanings and interpretations were then sought from each of the categories by identifying patterns. The data was then finally summarized.

## III. HISTORY OF WEAVING

Akwaboa (1989) as cited in Adom (2010) traces the history of weaving to the early man's usage of the weaving processes such as criss-crossing and intertwining twigs, reeds and rushes to produce clothes. Later, as man became acquainted with other fibres and animal hairs, he employed these also in the production of his textile clothes. Throughout the centuries of evolution that followed, the spindle and the loom were developed – the former in the attempt to obtain a longer continuous thread from the fibres and animal hairs and the later as a stable fixtures on which to attach threads. Commenting on how the early man discovered the art of weaving, Corbman (1983) said the primitive people might have discovered the art of weaving by observing interlaced grasses and twigs in the nest of birds, and thus might have discovered how they could make clothing for themselves, or they may have seen rushes naturally interlacing as they grew. Today, looms are the main devices used for executing weaving. The types of looms vary from one area to the other rather than from century to century. The ancient Greeks seemed to prefer the same type of upright loom on which one weaves from top to bottom, as did some North American, Indian tribes and the early Scandinavians. Egyptian weavers of about 2500BC used another type of upright and vertical loom similar to that of later Persians, and also a horizontal loom, such as were used by the Incas and are still used today in Mexico, Gautamala, and Peru. Commenting on the looms discovered in Sub-Sahara Africa, Picton and Mack (1979) said that almost all the different kinds of looms discovered have their parallels elsewhere. To them, the mere comparison of technicalities is relatively fruitless as cultural traits tend to move as part of a package rather than in isolation. They suggested that a careful comparative study of the terminology employed by different people within the border context of textile production is the only reliable method of investigation. Whatever loom that was employed, the principle remained the same – spacing and interlocking a weft or horizontal thread through a stationary warp or vertical threads. Although fabric of the utmost beauty and sheerness were woven even in the days of the ancients, weaving tools supplies were in a constant process of refinement in order to enhance further the finished product. Europe, until the early renaissance depended on traders and crusaders to bring her the elaborate textiles from the far and Near East. Then the Italian weavers mastered the intricate weaves and skills of the orient as did eventually the French, Spanish and English so that they could make their own velvets, damask and brocades. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in England, the drive for increased textile production and ease of operation was continually going on and led eventually to the discoveries that brought about the industrial revolution. However when the first settler came to American, they had no need for the simple household and clothing demands of the

times. In Africa, according to the Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia, weaving started in Egypt. It states that the Egyptians started weaving long before the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Some of their textile products at the time were embroidery, lace and woven articles. Ross (1998) agrees with this. She said that narrow strip pieces woven on handlooms began in ancient Egypt. According to her, most nations acquired their weaving technology directly or indirectly from ancient Egypt. Research and inventions are still an important part of the weaving industry. Some of new equipments and processes are vastly intricate and complicated but familiarity with hand weaving reveals that the basic techniques are the same whether it is done on a handloom or a high powered loom.

#### IV. KENTE WEAVING IN ASHANTI

There exists no complete documentation on the history of Kente for various authors have given different accounts of its origin, which are explained partly with a legend and partly with historical account. Asihene (1978) says that according to an Asante legend, Kente weaving was first introduced at Bonwire by Ota Kraban and Ameyaw, who got the idea from a spider's web during the reign of Nana Bobie of Bonwire. There was no doubt that Ota Kraban studied weaving in the North. With Ameyaw, he made experiments in dyeing cotton yarn with local dyes. After obtaining a variety of yarns, they wove the first Kente cloth, called *Oyokomaa*. The first umbrella of Bonwire chief Nana Bobie was made with this *Oyokomaa* fabric. Ansan (1966) on historical accounts however, traces the origin of Kente to early weaving tradition in ancient West Africa kingdoms that flourished between 300 AD and 1600 AD. He continues to say that Kente is an outgrowth of various weaving traditions that existed in West Africa prior to the formation of the Asante kingdom in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He goes on to mention that archaeological research has dated examples of narrow-strip cloths found in Bandiagara cliffs in Mali to as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD. These cloths used in burial ceremonies probably during the medieval Ghana, Mali empires have technical and aesthetic features similar to many of the narrow strip cloth woven by various ethnic groups in West Africa. He concludes that while Kente cloth may have its roots in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, West Africa weaving traditions and weaving as a whole in Africa was developed earlier and this could be buttressed with the fact that archaeological excavations have produced such weaving instrument as spindle whorls and loom weights in ancient Meroe Empire which flourished between 500 BC and 300 AD. Also, pictorial and archaeological evidence proved the existence of weaving industries in those eras. However, according to Kyermaten (1964), in present day Ghana, weaving started in the northern part of the country. The weavers spun yarns for weaving from locally grown cotton. Prior to using cotton, Rattray (1927) says that rough raffia was used. In the seventeenth century, weaving became established at Bonwire in Ashanti. Asihene (1978) says that the yarns for weaving were first prepared by hand. Women picked, fluffed, and spun the cotton by twisting the spindle between the thumb and fingers. The men wound the yarns from the spindle (*gyaniboo*) on to the bobbins (*dodowa*). Men laid the warp and

weft and did the weaving. In addition to cotton, strands of silk obtained from the *Okanantan* spider were used. Local silk was later replaced by silk imported from Europe. Sometimes cotton yarns are mixed with silk for weaving Kente fabric. The traditional loom on which the Kente and other cloths are woven has four heddles (*asanan*). The treadles of the loom are held and depressed alternately between the toes. The shuttle, which is used for weaving the weft, consists of the bobbin or spools (*dodowa*), the centre pin, and the case (*enkomenam*). (See Fig. 1)



Figure 1: Weaving on the traditional loom

#### V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

##### A. OBJECTIVE 1: TO EXAMINE THE INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN ELEMENTS ON ASANTE KENTE

These are the main findings based on the primary data obtained from the responses received through the questionnaire administered, interviews and observation. The researchers found out that Asante indigenous Kente has been influenced by European elements. The researchers realized these impacts of the European elements on these aspects of Asante Kente:

- ✓ Tools and materials
- ✓ Design
- ✓ Production processes
- ✓ Fashion

The researchers noticed that some of the tools and materials for Kente cloth production have been impacted by European textiles tools and materials:

- ✓ The traditional Kente loom has been impacted by European-inclined looms like the broadloom.
- ✓ Some of the loom accessories for the broadloom have been influenced by European loom accessories in their shape and designs. An example is the shuttle.
- ✓ The raw materials for Kente weaving which were primarily cotton and silk have been influenced by imported raw materials from Europe like rayon, acetate, tencel etc.

The researchers found out that the choice of designs for Kente cloth production has been impacted by European-inclined designs:

- ✓ The traditional symbols used for Kente have been influenced by man-made shapes like diamond, square etc and some of the traditional one has been modified.
- ✓ Linear designs in European T-shirts have influenced the traditional designs used for Kente production.
- ✓ Inscriptions and pictures have also influenced the traditional designs used for Kente production.
- ✓ Articles produced from Kente have been influenced by European clothing styles and article like dressing bags, ties, belts, bangles etc. (See Fig. 2 and Fig. 3)

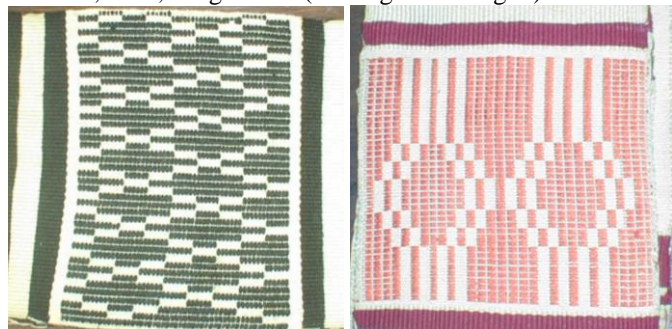


Figure 2: Traditional Designs



Figure 3: European-Inclined Designs

The researchers did not identify any influence on the production processes for Kente weaving. The researchers also found out that European fashion styles have impacted the fashion trends of Asantes:

- ✓ Indigenous cloths have been influenced by the wearing of European suit, miniskirts, leggings, big trousers and T-shirt etc.

#### B. OBJECTIVE 2: TO EXAMINE THE MERITS AND DEMERITS OF THE EUROPEAN ELEMENTS ON ASANTE KENTE

From the analysis outlined, these were found out by the researchers:

The researchers noticed that there are positive impacts of the European elements on the Kente produced in Ashanti. Some of these merits are:

- ✓ The broadloom is assisting effectively in the weaving of wider dimensions of Kente and also in the creation of more complex and intricate designs in Kente weaving. According to one Kente weaver who works on the broadloom, the broadloom that has six treadles and can weave a wider dimension of Kente unlike the traditional loom is credited to the Europeans likewise some loom accessories like shuttle etc whose shape and designs are European inclined. The researchers after critically observing the broadloom and experimenting weaving on

it in comparison to the traditional loom, saw that it was better. This is owing to the fact that wider sizes of the Kente cloth can be woven on it. Again, more complex designs including pictures could be woven on the broadloom unlike the traditional loom. This is seen as a positive influence since the broadloom opens the door for the creation of diversified designs to meet the high standards of fashion today. (See Fig. 4 and Fig. 5)



Figure 4: Broad loom

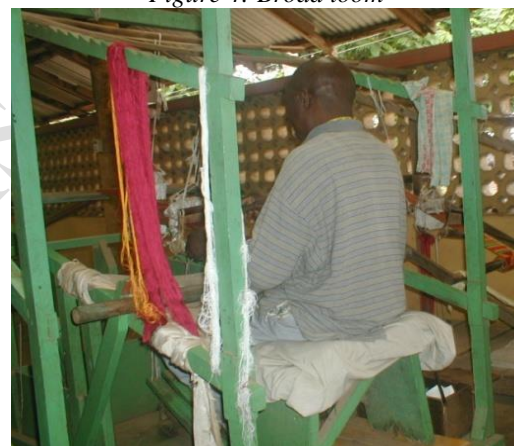


Figure 5: Traditional loom

- ✓ Imported yarns from Europe have heightened the quality and durability of Kente cloths. One of the respondents admitted that “the imported yarns from Europe were of high quality and it gave the woven fabrics glossy surfaces” (Samuel Sampson, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2009, personal interaction). Again, they said that they don’t resort to the use of only cotton or silk yarns but they also use other imported yarns from Europe which are of equal quality. The researchers observed some of these yarns imported from Europe and realized that their colours were very bright and they also gave the woven fabrics glossy touch.
- ✓ The articles and designs which are European inclined produced by the use of Kente have widened the usefulness and value of Kente. It has also helped in attracting tourists and aiding the weavers and the country as a whole in earning foreign exchange. (See Fig. 6)



Figure 6: Some Imported Yarns from Europe

The researchers however noticed that there are some negative impacts of the European elements on the Kente produced in Ashanti. Some of these demerits are:

- ✓ The European-inclined designs are gradually making the traditional designs that embody the cultural heritage of the Asante to fade out in all the textile products produced in Asante especially in Kente cloths.
- ✓ European fashion styles are not helping in the sales of the Asante Kente and are not reflecting favourably on the morals and attitudes of Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole.

C. OBJECTIVE 3: TO FIND OUT THE ASPECTS OF THE EUROPEAN ELEMENTS AND ASPECTS OF THE ASANTE KENTE THAT NEEDS TO BE PROMOTED OR DISCONTINUED IN ASHANTI

Aspects of European elements that need to be promoted are:

- ✓ The broadloom and raw materials imported from Europe for Kente weaving should be promoted.
- ✓ European-inclined articles produced from Kente such as ties, dressing bags and inscriptions etc woven as designs in Kente should be promoted.

Aspects of European elements that need to be discontinued are:

- ✓ European fashion styles that are negatively affecting the morals and attitudes of Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole should be stopped.
- ✓ European inclined designs extensively used that are making the traditional designs to fade out should be discontinued.

Aspects of Asante Kente that need to be promoted are:

- ✓ Traditional designs like adinkra symbols and other ideographs, signs and symbols that portray and educate us on our culture heritage should be promoted to ensure the revival and propagation of our culture to the younger generation.
- ✓ The indigenous production processes for Kente weaving that helps in retaining the value of our prestigious Kente should be promoted.
- ✓ Asante fashion styles, norms and concepts that instilled good morals and attitudes in Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole should be revived and promoted.

Aspects of Asante Kente that need to be discontinued are:

All the indigenous tools and materials that are not helping Asante Kente to meet the taste and demands of the modern day Asante and Ghanaians as a whole should be discontinued. All indigenous textile production processes that down play quality and value should be discontinued. Some of the Kente

weavers interviewed said that every aspect of Asante textile production should be maintained since all of them serve as tools in propagating our culture to the younger generation. They suggested that the European concept of design, production techniques and tools and materials can be used alongside the indigenous ones. The head of visual art department at the National Culture Centre in Kumasi suggested that the indigenous tools and techniques should be enhanced to meet the current demands for textiles in the international market. The researchers after his observation saw the need for changes and adjustments to be done in the areas of tools and materials and production techniques of the textiles done in Asante.

VI. SECONDARY DATA

Osei (2002), Salm and Falola (1966), Asihene (1978), Asmah (2004) and Adom (2005) all asserted that there has been an influence on the tools and materials for Asante Kente by European tools and materials. Osei (2002) and Asihene (1978) stressed on the importation of high quality yarns from Europe which are used in the Kente cloth production. The findings in the primary data affirmed this. Osei (2002) highlighted that the influence of European elements on the indigenous Asante tools and materials have been positive. He said that the imported yarns from Europe used for Kente weaving have helped the Kente cloth in meeting the demands of the international market. The findings from the primary data also affirm that the general influence of European elements on the tools and materials for Asante Kente production are positive and should be promoted. With regards to the influence of European elements on the choice of design for Asante Kente production, Asihene (1978) pointed out that some of the indigenous designs are also forgotten because of some influence of European elements. This, he advised has to cease. He emphasized that the traditional elements have a great potential of rescuing Ghana's heritage as a whole for prosperity and utilized for national development. Gyekye (1998) hinted that every society in the modern world has many traditional elements inherited from the past and the society takes pride in several of these elements and build on them. However, the findings in the primary data revealed that the traditional designs for Asante Kente cloth production are gradually fading away. This according to the writers quoted and the findings from the primary data has cease, since it's negatively affecting the Kente done in Asante today. The editor of the second Image commented on the influence of European fashion on Asante fashion and the morals of Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole. She mentioned some of these European clothing such as miniskirts, short slits, tight jeans, sexy beach wear, leggings etc. As to whether this has impacted positively or negatively on the morals of Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole, she said that this influence has been negative. She added that husbands divorce their wives because they cannot meet the demands of their extravagant fashionable wives and boyfriends gilt their girl friends because of the same offence. The former first lady of Ghana, Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings also said that there were societal norms that barred individuals from wearing such cloths but

today, their abolishment have led to moral degeneration like rape, teenage pregnancy etc. Glime (1993) however noted some positive impacts of European clothing. She said that it has led to the realization of potential ability for personal advancement and civilization. The findings from the primary data affirm the assertions of both writers that European fashion has positively and at the same time negatively affected the morals of Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole. Gyekye (1996) advised that there should be a blend of tradition and modernity thus the good aspects should be picked while the negative aspects should be stopped. His view correlated to the findings of the primary data. Most of the respondents interviewed and questioned shared his view that all the European fashion styles that are negatively affecting the morals and attitudes of Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole should be stopped.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

This research attempted to identify the impacts of European elements on Asante Kente. It was to examine the merits and demerits of the European elements on Asante Kente. It also touched on the areas of the European elements and aspects of the Asante Kente that needed to be promoted or discontinued in Ashanti. It has been noted that, there are influences of some European elements namely their tools and materials, concept of design, production processes and fashion on the Kente done in Ashanti. However, these influences were both positive and negative. After close examination, the study revealed that the merits of the influence of these European elements were seen in the tools and materials and some of the production processes of Asante Kente. On the other hand, the demerits of the influence of these European elements were also realized in some European fashion styles and their concept of design which are eroding Asante's of the good gems inherent in their own cultural heritage. The onus therefore lies on the government, Asante Kente weavers, Asante textile patronisers, corporate institutions and agencies who are concerned about the improvement of the textile industry to blend the positive aspects of the influence from Europe with the good aspects of the indigenous Asante Kente to upgrade it to the standards of the current textile demand and at the same time to aid in the preservation and propagation of the rich cultural heritage of Asante to the younger generation and to the international world.

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