



BACKGROUND - IT'S ALL IN THE NAME

The word Kente is often used as a generic term for this narrow strip-woven cloth. Originally only used to refer to the silk cloths woven by the Ashanti people of inland Ghana, the term came from the Fante word *zenten*, meaning 'basket'. The Fante tribe of coastal Ghana bought the cloth from the Ashanti and compared the patterns to those woven in baskets. Historically the Ashanti themselves didn't use the word Kente but preferred a variety of descriptive terms based on quality. For example, *Asasia* for a silk cloth that was commissioned by royalty, *Nsaduaso* for a 'better quality' cloth and *Ntama* which means simply 'cloth'. Both of the latter would have been woven in cotton. Today silk has mostly been replaced by rayon.

What makes Kente cloth unique? Many people think it is the way it is woven on a narrow strip loom. In fact, strip weaving is quite common all over the world but the Kente method uses *double heddles*, which makes it unique. Normally, the weaver uses two double heddles but for *Asasia* cloth he uses a third pair, which some researchers say makes this the most labour intensive weaving in the world.

Kente cloth - woven legacy and patchwork inspiration

Discover the fascinating cloth of West African chiefs with **Magie Relph**

Clockwise from top:
Ewe cloth. Cotton.
Probably circa.
1950s, Ghana

Detail of Ewe cloth

Kente by Maggie
Relph, 2000

Ashanti style single
trip weaves (stole)
Rayon

Detail of Kente

Why am I hooked on Kente, the majestic cloth of West African chiefs? One obvious answer lies in its block-style patterning – just like patchwork. But the similarities don't end there. The ancient method of building up a whole Kente cloth is almost like making a quilt. Imagine groups of weavers working together, enjoying each others company as much as their task, and you'll see what I mean. Let's look a bit deeper and see how these fabulous, colourful cloths are created.

ASHANTI AND EWE WEAVING

The Ashanti (pronounced 'asante') and the Ewe (pronounced 'evay') tribes are the most famous exponents in this type of weaving and cloth making. In the eighteenth century, when the Ashanti royal court was at its peak, it became a true art form and an entire tradition developed based on the concepts of royalty and status.

The top of the range *Asasia* cloths, at times woven purely in silk, could only be commissioned by the *Asantehene*, or Supreme Chief, either for himself



or a favoured and loyal relative or chieftain. Once a pattern had been commissioned nobody else would dare to recreate it. Today master weavers maintain this tradition. When they create a new pattern they will offer it to a chief for him to name and once named the cloth is protected from being copied - just like a formal copyright.

For the Ashanti, the main centre of weaving is Bonwire, in Ghana, where the most beautiful silk Kente's were made for the Asatehenes. For the Ewe, who had a less centralised court system, the weaving was scattered throughout Ghana and Togo.

TECHNIQUE - THE MASTER WEAVERS

The weaving process starts with the warper - an expert in his own right. Working out of doors, he sets up warping poles in the street to wind his thread around, eventually winding the warp into a skein ready for the weaver. The warp contains a complex mix of colour and an expert warper can create a huge variety of warp patterns - all from memory.

In the weaving villages the streets are filled with weavers busy at work with their apprentices. Often these are their own children or nephews, learning to prepare shuttles, keeping an eye on the *dragstone* to ensure the warp tension is just right and doing all the little jobs that need to be done. Picture them clustered together under shade trees and makeshift awnings. There's plenty of gossip for sure, and doesn't that sound familiar?

As the weavers work they manipulate the heddles to create the pattern. The first pair closest to the weaver is used to work on the *warp-faced* section, where the vertical stripes of the warp pattern are seen. When the weaver wants to move onto the *weft-faced* section

he moves to the second pair of heddles. These are set up with the warp threads bunched together so that the weft passes over more of these at one time. Sometimes this section is worked in such a way that the entire warp is hidden. The weaver creates additional patterns by introducing a *weft float*, or inlay, often by *picking* the warp by hand and often completely from memory! The weaver will use a short stick to measure his pattern, keeping the block size consistent. More complex patterns can be achieved by using a third pair of heddles.

Traditionally the Ashanti worked only with geometric patterns while the Ewe developed a range of representational patterns such as animals, keys and household items. Whether geometric or representational, every pattern has a meaning and often a proverb attached to it.

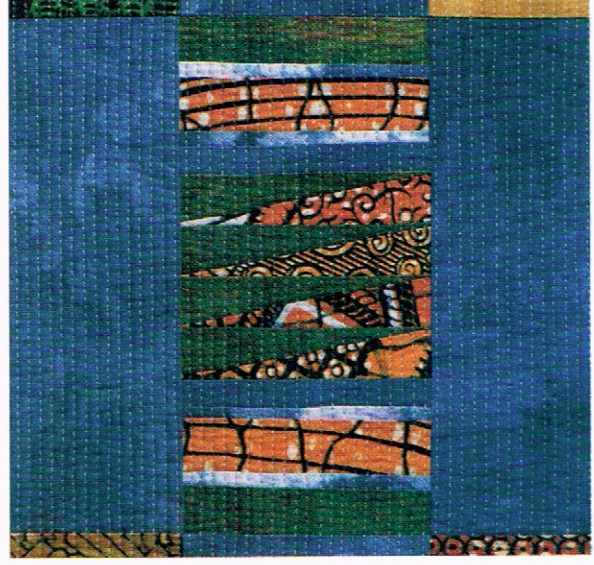
Finished strips are usually about four inches wide. The older retired weavers sew the strips together by hand to make a finished cloth. It's no simple task though. They must carefully manipulate the strips to enhance the patterns that have been worked out in the weaver's head, in much the same way that we patchworkers have to match our points and corners as we create blocks and then assemble our blocks into finished quilts.

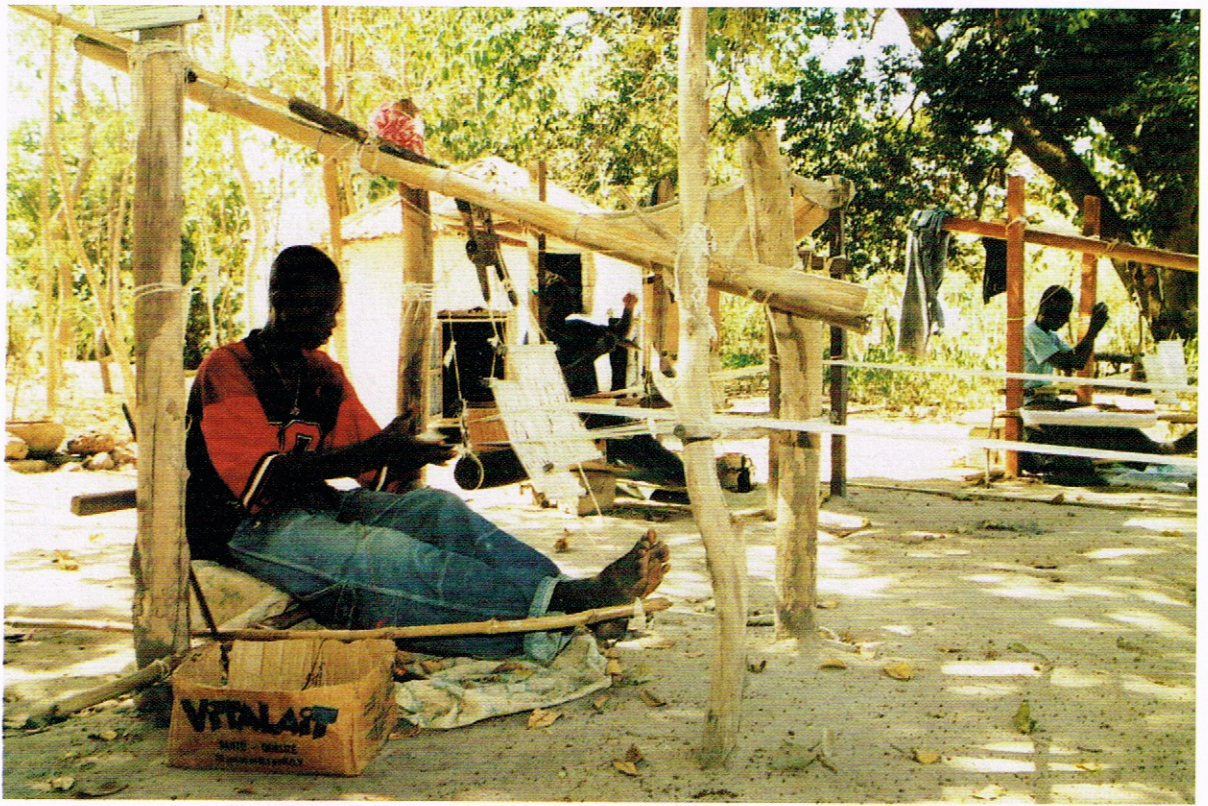
When assembled, a whole Ashanti man's wearing cloth is about 24 strips wide and nine feet long, which requires a warp that is about 200 feet long. For women the cloth itself is slightly smaller but she does get a pair of them!

All of these skilled and complicated jobs were reserved exclusively for men. Traditionally women and strip weaving were strictly taboo, though today these barriers are breaking down and women are getting involved in this craft.

PATTERN - TRADITION AND ADAPTATION

Ewe weavers have adapted well to modern trends, weaving for local sale as well as for growing tourist and North American markets. Today's weavers are drawing on designs from the Ashanti and other cultures and traditions to create new, exciting designs of their own. While some newer cloths may not be of the same technical complexity and quality as some older cloths that were woven for the Asantehene chieftain, today's weavers are





Clockwise from top: Photographs of dragon weaving taken in The Gambia. The looms are very similar to the ones used in Ghana. Note that in the close-up the weaver is using a single pair of heddles rather than two pairs

Ashanti style single strip weaves (stole) Rayon

Right: Adwinasa by Maggie Relp 2003

maintaining an awareness of an ancient craft and keeping it alive in a changing world.

The Kente motifs, or overall patterns, have real significance in the tradition, which is reflected by their names. For example, Adwinasa is the name given to the most complex Ashanti designs where the entire cloth is weft faced - a lot of work indeed! The name translates as 'all motifs are used up' or 'fullness of ornament'.

Today Kente cloth has become a kind of Pan African symbolic cloth worn by political leaders and dignitaries from all over Africa to help express their African identity. Kente cloth has been presented to well known visitors to Africa, including Mohammed Ali and Bill Clinton. The Kente stole, a single woven strip, is popular among African Americans for academic and religious ceremonies.

Many societies around the world are looking back in an effort to rediscover and reaffirm their cultural traditions, and the Ashanti, Ewe and the African community worldwide are no different. Kente cloth is alive and well, its patterns nurtured in the hands of a few specialist craftsmen, and now women too.

COLOUR - FROM INDIGO TO RAINBOW

Initially, before European influence in West Africa, indigo blue was the main colour available to the weavers, though some coloured yarns did make it across the Sahara by camel caravan. Then, when Europeans began trading into West Africa directly, the weavers adapted quickly to the arrival of new colours and fibres. And there's yet another parallel to patchwork . . . when silk cloths arrived in West Africa via European traders the weavers unravelled it and re-used the silk threads to weave into their own Kente cloths. Doesn't that sound like us perpetual patchworkers - always taking perfectly good fabric, cutting it up and sewing it back together again! ♦



FURTHER INFORMATION

- ◆ Duncan Clarke has written a number of books about African textiles. Visit his website at www.adire.clara.net, it's full of information and wonderful Kente cloths, many of which are for sale. Very tempting!

Other books and websites

- ◆ African Textiles, John Picton and John Mack. British Museum Press, 1989.
- ◆ African Textiles: Colour and Creativity Across a Continent, John Gillow. Thames and Hudson, 2003.
- ◆ www.nmfa.si.edu
- ◆ www.ghana.com

Definitions

Heddle, double heddle All warp threads on a loom are passed through the 'eyes' of a heddle. A pair of double heddles is joined by a pulley and work together. It is the way that these are threaded and worked that creates pattern.

Shed The open area created when the heddles are manipulated for the weft to pass through.

Warp faced Where the warp is the dominant yarn. It is this thread that can be seen and creates the vertical stripe pattern, hiding the weft thread. The first pair of heddles is worked to create this pattern.

Weft faced Where the weft is the dominant yarn. The weft yarn is used to create alternate colour to the warp and will hide, by degrees and sometimes completely, the warp yarn. The second pair of heddles is worked to create this pattern.

Weft float Additional weft threads used to create additional geometric or representational patterns. Often the warp can be seen through this pattern, normally done by picking. Occasionally a third set of heddles is used to enhance the creation of this pattern.

Picking Working across the warp to lift the relevant threads by hand to pass the weft through, thus creating pattern.

Dragstone The skein of warp thread is attached to this. It sits between 10 and 40 feet from the weaver and loom on a sled and it is this that maintains the warp tension.

