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## Kente Weaving and Tourism in a Cluster of Kente Towns Inashanti

**Abraham Ekow Asmah**

Lecturer, Industrial Art, Department of Integrated Rural Art and Industry,  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology [KNUST], Kumasi, Ghana

**Isaac Gyasi**

Senior Technician, Department of Rural Art and Industry,  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology [KNUST], Kumasi, Ghana

**Samuel Teye Daitey**

Principal Technician, Department of Integrated Rural Art and Industry,  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana

### **Abstract:**

*One of the most promising drivers of growth in the nation's economy is tourism. In Ashanti Region, Bonwire, Adawomase, Ntonso and Tewobeabi are the four major clusters of tourist destinations. This is due to their interesting, unique, authentic, cultural and traditional hand woven cloth called Kente and its social-economic activities. This creative craft plays an important role in the development of tourism in Ashanti Region. In this paper, ethnographic approach is used to describe the creative process of the Kente industry in the towns of Bonwire, Adawomase, Ntonso and Tewobeabi. Based on the results of the field research, the authors conclude that these Kente industrial centres are now more oriented towards meeting the needs of tourists in their bid to promote its rich cultural heritage. Due to extensive interaction and the positive response from the general public, Kente weavers of Bonwire, Adawomase, Ntonso and Tewobeabi are experiencing a unique and characteristic creative phase. The tourists negotiate the values between the old designs and the new designs and can find both royal traditional designs and new, creative and innovative Kente products of export quality. Today, these locations are trademark Kente tourism towns of international respect.*

**Keywords:** Kente, weaving, Tourism, Bonwire, Ntonso, Tewobeabi and Adawomase.

### **1. Introduction**

Apart from its green vegetation, accolade its capital as the garden city, Ashanti Region carries a status of a special region (often referred to as the hub of culture) as the cradle of culture, registering the first national cultural centre in Ghana. The region serves as the focal point and the amalgamation of ancient arts due to its various economic trade links and activities from the north, east, west and southern parts of West Africa and internally, the entire nation. By its location, Ashanti region also attracts young people from other regions of Ghana and beyond who come and learn varieties of skills and study due to its numerous educational institutions. Currently, the region can be considered to be one of the major tourist destinations in Ghana, due to its natural vegetation, unique ancient cultural and artistic sites via the role it played in Ghana's history.

As it is experienced all over the world, tourist destinations, attracts a high demand for cultural souvenirs. Likewise, tourism in Ashanti region is closely connected to the souvenirs of the local traditional craft products. One outstanding impact of tourism in this region is its lead to the commoditization of a variety of Kente weaving sites that existed before tourist invasion. The creative process and the product of local weavers are unique. These weaving centres are spread in and around the region: in Ntonso, Tewobeabi, Krofofrom, Bantam-Centre for National Culture Kumasi, Ahwia, Pankronu, Adawomase and Bonwire.

Both domestic and foreign tourists can observe creative processes of these weavers. They can even purchase these creations as a souvenir to take back home. In addition, travellers also receive satisfying and memorable attention. Tourists' impression is further strengthened by nature's beauty, the well-designed setting, the uniqueness of the creative process, the exceptional products, as well as the community's hospitality and direct involvement in sustaining the weaving centres.

The Ashanti craft was famous for gold work, silk weaving, brass casting, woodcarving and many others. These were originally developed for the king and his court and for the palace organization. The Ashanti court was created just after 1700, after the defeat of Denkyira, Gyaman to the west, Tekyiman to the north, and, after a disastrous setback, Akyem to the east. As custom demands, skilled craftsmen taken as prisoners of war were retained by Ashanti. Much as most craft items can be traced back to Denkyira, according

to Picton, et al, (1989), *Tekyiman* claims to have originated the silk-weaving known as Kente. Currently, there are a variety of crafts in and around Ashanti region, including wood carving, pottery, beadwork, Kente weaving, batik and leather craft. Among the Kente weaving locations are *Ntonso*, *Tewobeabi*, and *Bantam*-Centre for National Culture Kumasi, *Adawomase* and *Bonwire*. These craft centres are apt to study because of their recent periods of international recognition experiences and significant growth in all aspects of their weaves including: design, materials, techniques, production processes, and marketing. These changes are due to the establishment and interventions of dynamic NGO'S, like Aid to Artisans.

One of the impacts of this initiative is that today, the Kente crafts, produce seek to meet the tourists demand for souvenirs. The weaving centres has become an important tourist destination and is frequented by tourists. The tourists have an opportunity to witness the authentic creative works in these clusters of Kente weaving centres established in these areas. Kente has now become a commodity product, a material for sale to consumers locally, nationally, and internationally.

## 2. Research Methodology

This paper is written on the basis of a preliminary research. The study focuses on the centres of Kente weaving in Ashanti. Actual and factual data in the context of production practices, the process of creation, and the product innovation is obtained and elicited from traditional Kente weavers and experts. The data were also gathered from observation of the environment, lifestyle, and response of traditional Kente weavers toward tourism in the various weaving centres. In addition, special attention was also given to the history of Kente weaving in Asante.

There are two categories of cultural tourism. First, cultural tourism includes study tours, performing arts, folklore, pilgrimages, festivals, and visits to historical sites. Second, cultural tourism in a loose sense, seeks to broaden one's outlook, expand knowledge, add individual experience, and lead to new findings (Prohaska, 1995). This form of tourism is supported by written text that describes a certain reality of a tourist destination. This written text helps cultural tourists (or, consumers) of the second type to achieve their objectives, overcome their boredom, and also motivates purchase (Mossberg, 2007). This study was done using an ethnographic approach. This approach allows the researchers to give a detailed description of the subject and of the object based on the data and facts found in the field (Spradley, 1972). The data were obtained through open-ended interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation.

Kente weaving centres chosen in the Ashanti region, was because of its productive, creative, innovative nature and the ability of its products to reach the global market. This indicates that the continuity and change in Kente weaving is in line with the interests of local and global consumers. Even before the establishment of the *Kente-Fest* in 2012, the centres experienced diversity, rapid and dynamic utilization of the Kente weaves for other aesthetic and functional products and increased domestic and foreign tourists to these centres. Data collection aimed to find the views, attitudes, responses, conceptions, strategies, programs, activities, and basic government policy regarding the existence of the Kente tourism centres in relation to tourism in Ashanti.

The collected information was analysed to depict the reality of life of Kente weavers who create new and innovative products that meet the market interests. Descriptive analysis was used to give an overview of the condition of the various centres, social behaviour, history, production techniques, and Kente products. This analysis also looked at the creative ideas, processes and creative work patterns, and the impacts of innovation that enabled the weavers to penetrate the global market. We hope that this descriptive analysis will contribute positively to the planning of art and cultural tourism potential in Ashanti.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. History of Kente Weaving in Ashanti Region

History indicates that Kente weaving in Asante believed to have existed in West Africa prior to the formation of the Asante Kingdom in the 17th century. Most weaving in Ashanti, is done on narrow looms. These woven strips of about ten centimetres wide, are sewn together to form a larger clothing. The nucleus of Kente weaving started in a small area around the royal family house called *Mangoase* at *Adum* under the auspices of the *Asantehene*, the highest chief of the Asante, Nana *Otumfuo Agyemang Prempeh I* for religious, cultural, political and other utilitarian purposes, (Bowdich, 1819). The weavers were later settled in a town called *Bonwire* about 20 kilometres from Kumasi and about 9 kilometres from *Ejisu* in the *Ejisu-Juaben* District. It later extended to neighbouring towns like *Adawomase*, *Ntonso*, *Tewobeabi*, *Wonno* and other parts of the country such as the Brong Ahafo, which was then part of the Asante Kingdom. Their prime assignment was to develop and produce new design weaves solely for the *Otumfuo*, the spiritual head of the Asante kingdom. According to Rattray (1927), the basic silver thread that runs through Kente weaving, was their recognition of the supremacy of God and the involvement and support of their ancestry, which tends to become the real inspiration of every weaver in these communities.

Though they were warlike at the time, the chronicles of the Asante kingdom legendarily explains that two messengers led by *Ota Karaban*, ordered by the *Asantehene* to visit a virgin land far from the kingdom were skilled weavers (spiders weaving the web nest) were observed with keen interest. Upon their return replicated what they saw using the available raw material raffia to produce a cloth for the king. The legend, safely suggest that Kente was learnt from the skilled weavers, but as to who or place where it occurred is hidden from the story. The good news is that this great act of the king has now made available Kente to the entire nation of Ghana.

These weaving settlements were referred to as weaving communities headed by a member of the royal family referred to as the Chief of Kente (*Kentehene*) of the community. This title makes him the most knowledgeable person in the field. The economies of these communities are focused on Kente weaving and subsistence agriculture. Most farmers trek daily from their homes to the farmlands in

the farming seasons, which is the raining season and work on their weaving looms on corridors during the lean or dry season (Figure1).

The total area inhabited in *Adawomase* and *Bonwire* at that time was a lot smaller than the area of today's weaving communities. Until early 1970, these towns were considered as villages, but have developed into a township with many of its mud houses transformed into concrete, cement buildings along the main highway within the various towns, however, there are few mud houses which still remain. The oral tradition of the local people tells us that these lands were grassland originally farming communities that had thorny, weedy farm fields. These lands currently had been further transformed into human settlements, comprising of traders, public servants, private business owners as well as Kente weavers and other forms of artisans. However, the area is still known as weaving communities. The products created by these artisans had a significant aesthetic quality referred to as the Kente craft art. All the product made by the artisans in these communities, essentially go through the peculiar handmade production process using available raw materials in the weaving communities.

The fast-paced, progressive growth, shown by these weaving centres as tourist villages have had an effect on the surrounding areas, which also helped to enliven their existence as the centre of handmade Traditional Kente weaving centres. Essential human amenities introduced into these weaving towns by the government has helped to invigorate the socioeconomic activities of these weaving communities (Edusei, et al, 2014). Notably, these artisans readily and actively continue to take hold of consumer interests both at home and abroad. Several weaving production units (Figure2) successfully obtained large orders, a sign that local artisans are beginning to stand on their feet. These occurrences gives pronounced hope for the improvement of socioeconomic situation, in these communities (Edusei, et al, 2014). The Kente craft art has spread widely in other communities adjacent to *Bonwire* and *Adawomase* townships due to its introduction into the government educational curriculum. Its success seems to demonstrate their resilience and strength to sustain this craftsmanship despite the difficulties faced by these weaving communities during its recession and influx of foreign mechanised imitated Kente clothing from china (Gott, 2012).

At the entrance of these towns are marked with magnificent, colourful banners or sign post inscription that reads for example "Welcome to *Bonwire* or *Adawomase* weaving Village", an indication that these weaving communities still prefer to call their towns as villages rather than towns. Weavers and residents feel satisfied and comfortable with the title Kente Village because of how it started. However, the use of the term "Kente Village" is already widely accepted and used by the general public. The long history of these weaving communities is deeply embedded in the minds and hearts of local weavers. Although their works have experienced changes that increased the aesthetic value, eventually leading to a successful entry into the international market, they are proud of it being called a Kente village. Varieties of first-rated Kente products are exported to America, Europe, Australia, Britain and other regions abroad. Including its surrounding communities over 600 weaving units of Kente producers employ at least two master weavers and between two to ten trainees (Asmah, 2006). The Kente craft itself is becoming more unique, creative, and meets the aesthetic taste of the market.



Figure 1: Kente weaver working on the verander of his house

Figure 2: A unit of Kente weavers operating within an open court yard close to a house



Figure 3A & B: The inner view of the co-operate weaving shed of the Export Production council built under the auspices of Aid to Artisans-Ghana

Though there seems to be a strong desire for modernisation on their residency status among the citizenry, the authenticity of their natural settings is still maintained in that most mud houses are retained. Stores and Kente shops attract visitor's attention and are lined up by the side of most major roads. This has direct implication for the rise of the land prices in these locations. The desire to own or leased out land along the main street for building workshops, sales store or Kente shop, is generally prevalent.

There are, however, locals who sorely survive as farmers, traditional non-market oriented Kente weavers or building workers. Kente entrepreneurs who have the means find it easy to recruit local young weavers at their weaving workshops. These recruiters sometimes come from outside the weaving centres. Though this vocation is likely to increase revenues, it is less attractive to young people due to the laborious and tedious nature of the art. Elderly weavers, generally continue to produce traditional Kente, but their inclination now is more towards training the youth to acquire the needed skills to competitive products favourably in the marketplace. However, ardent traditional Kente weavers still persistent to remain in their old routine product; only a few forward-thinking weavers dare to enter the era of global market competition. These few forward-thinking weavers, of course, equip themselves with management skills, and have the means of modern technology and intensive communications through the Internet. Generally, these few weaving centres that have high production capacity have been using the modern means of communication intensively. They make use of information and telecommunications services, both for promotion, sales transactions and ordering. They also engage the collective services of various weaving units scattered all over the towns to advance their trade.

The surrounding nature and the social environment is moderately quiet as the dynamic weaving centres continue to endorse peace and harmony among the weaving communities. The features of the traditional social environment are still well preserved, without refusing the opportunities to change. An example was the *Bonwire* cooperative established in the early 1970's by A.T.A.G. (Aid to Artisans a non-governmental organization) (Figure 3A & B). At the entrance of the weaving centre is boldly printed on a metal board Export Production Village. This was viewed locally with mixed feelings. It contained a store and a large room for weaving, both of which signalled a marked departure from tradition. Some weavers preferred this cooperative arrangement, but others chose the seclusion of their own weaving units (Figure 1 & 2) and a more personal in their relationship with customers.

There is an adequate infrastructure development in most of the weaving centres. One major change that cannot be missed in these towns are the development of roads. In the 1900s, the town roads were narrow, dirty, and dusty, now they are wider and asphalted. This makes it easy for all types of public transportation to access the production centres. This demonstrates the strong will and determination of the communities and of the local government in promoting Kente weaving products to customers outside of these communities. The presence of these tourist centres has impacted on the social and economic lives of the communities to increase their incomes (Teye, 1999).

Although, visiting tourists generally bring their own vehicles, Tourist attendance is always ready to take tourists into various weaving centres for a visit. The existence of tourist guides ready to serve the tourists is one of the notable public services that shows the extent of tourist development available in these weaving centres (Hannam, et al, 2012). Of course, they require a fee for services commensurate with the duration and locations to be visited.

The zigzag-shaped ornament used in batik, screen prints, pottery motif) in colourful combination are distinctive style of Kente weave. Other design motif characteristics, cooperated in Kente cloth are generally geometric in nature, more similar to *Adinkra* symbols used for *Adinkra* printing cloths. These Kente motifs contain profound philosophical meaning derived from the wise saying of recognised custodians of culture. Infrastructure in the area has been developed further and the inter-town transport runs smoothly. Today, youths from the village continue their studies to higher levels of university education. This fact, once again, reflects the fact that the level of welfare of these communities is rising (Asmah, 2006).

The growing development of these tourism towns marks the beginning of their industrial and commoditization era. Weaving centres offer a range of commodity products to tourists (Hannam, et al, 2012). These developments also encouraged the growth of new, creative and innovative designs, leading to more demand for Kente weaving products. This plays an important role as a means to merchandise their products in the traditional market places or traditional Kente shops lined up on the main street of these communities. There are over 170 Kente craft shops and a few restaurants situated along the main roads that runs through the four towns. Other local Specialty craft shops cash in on snapping photographs for tourist consumption. These shops and restaurants are basically meant to serve tourists. All these clusters of towns have now turned into busy business towns especially for tourists.

Historically, Kente weavers were mostly men, but currently, women have started to show interest in weaving, signifying a transitional change in their production practices (Gillow, 2003). Furthermore, the design and the typology of products has changed. The weavers now produce not only full men's and women's cloth, but also decorative fast selling souvenirs such as flying ties, book marker, hand bands etc. All of this led to further socioeconomic and behavioural changes, due to the ever increasing demand for both domestic and foreign consumers. However, with adequate sign system, tourists would be able to locate easily the weaving centres or the production units within the towns themselves. Public awareness needs to be raised to address some of these shortcomings.

### 3.1. The Creative Process and Product Development

The conditions and income of weavers solely depend on Kente business. Social reality and living conditions are changing slowly. In 1970, the Centre for National Culture and the Department of Integrated Rural and Industry KNUST in Kumasi gave attention to Kente weaving by introducing the craft into their educational establishment. The outcome of this intervention to local weavers, gave a new design guidance to the weavers. The textile weaving expert, Mr Lionel *Idan*, trained in the art of design, structural weaves in Japan led this crusade when he became the Director of the Centre for National Culture Kumasi and the founder of the Department of Integrated

Rural and Industry. Now most Kente weavers are better equipped to translate designed graphs directly onto the loom during weaving to produce fascinating flying ties peculiar to Asante Kente.

Several outstanding weavers trained at the Centre for National Culture Kumasi and the Department of Integrated Rural and Industry serves as ambassadors in the contemporary art of Kente weaving (Figure 4A & C). The results of these outcomes reflect in various exhibitions of second cycle institutions of which most of these graduates disseminate their weaving knowledge. Many experts have published books on Kente weaving to provide guidance to literate weavers on improving the material processing, design technology and many more. Through research and community service, forums, seminars, and training workshops, these weaving communities have improved their marketing abilities to reflect on their diversified products (Figure 4A, B & C). The future looks bright as research projects are still being conducted by experts and specialists in related institutions.

All of this eventually could lessen the difficulties of weavers in these communities. Furthermore, interactions with artists, scholars, experts, and arts students will influence positively the effort to increase the revenues of these weavers. These efforts may become more apparent if weaving products successfully penetrate the overseas markets, such as the United States, Britain, Australia, Germany, and Canada.

The uniqueness of the traditional weaving crafts can be seen through the characteristic shapes derived from the values of traditional knowledge in Kente weaving (Labi, 2009). New innovations made by the weavers illustrate the level of ingenuity powered by elaborate finishing. Weaving techniques and the introduction of new enhanced traditional looms already in use are bound to improve the quality of products to meet the market demands. There are more and more educated citizens in these weaving communities, earning both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Many of such people continue their studies to more advanced levels at such educational institutions as the Graduate School of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, and other universities.



Figure 4A, B & C: Demonstrate the dexterity of Kente weavers to translate the tapestry technique of the traditional loom unto the broad loom- Centre for National Culture, Kumasi – Courtesy A. E. Asmah

These weaving centres like the Centre for National Culture Kumasi, have become one of the major tourist destinations with workshops and art shops that provide public services for recreation, education, and information and variety of products including souvenirs for tourists. Modernization of Kente weaving like a blazing fire spreads very quickly and affects the entire community. Signs of modernization among the weaving communities started with the initiatives of the Centre for National Culture Kumasi aimed at developing the weaving industry to a more advanced level.

For this purpose, many experts conducted training workshops and gave guidance, especially in regards to the development of the design which eventually led to the inclusion of *Adinkra* symbols to produce flying ties as oppose the traditional local style (Figure 5A). Development of the industry is now characterised by the existence of community workshops.

Another interesting development in the traditional Kente is the introduction of varied colour yarns and colour formations in weaving (Fening, 2006). The use of colours in Kente weaving has special significance. Predominant colours like black, red, orange and other “dark” colours are used for funerals and mourning (Figure 5A & 7C); gold for richness (Figure 5C & 6B); blue and silver for the Queen mother (Figure 6C); white for purity or joy, or for the funerals of the very old (Figure 7C); brown for seriousness of purpose and war. The choice of colour for a chief was carefully studied depending on the particular occasion as it is a coded language of his

own people (Labi, 2009). Their interpretation, could be influenced by life or death. The way these colours are combined communicates a silent, subtle language, and sometimes deliberately are open to more than one interpretation. For example, white combined with black, green or yellow expresses spirituality, vitality and balance (Figure 5B & 5C). While white used on its own represents the transition between two worlds and the ability of a pure soul to see both worlds at the same time.



Figure 5A, B & C: Effect of modernity regarding colour and type of Kente woven  
-Courtesy weavers of Bonwire



Figure 6A, B & C: Breaking away from traditional Kente colours to customer choice of colour and yarn type  
- Courtesy weavers of Adanwomase

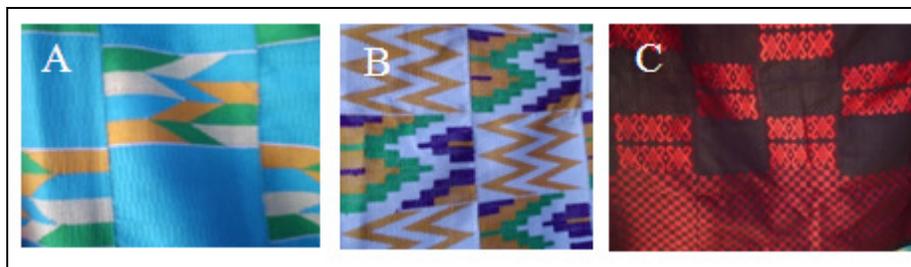


Figure 7A, B & C: Integration of tradition and modernity in terms of design and colour choice  
- Courtesy weavers of Ntonso

The impact of these developments in Kente cloth goes beyond the selective adoption of new materials such as synthetic fibres and Lurex (Figure 6A& 6C). Due to new demands from consumers, many Kente weavers attempt to give their work a local appeal by utilising weaving traditions and contemporary design motifs and style leading to modifications in design, and in some cases to the creative exploration of new design directions. Though new trends are introduced, the distinctive traditional style of weaving remain apparent (Svašek, 1997). Interestingly, the traditional Kente interacts with the custom-made ones in stimulating in an unpredictable way. Inspired by the Pan-Africanist ideology of the 1960s, the new Diaspora has caused a blossoming of interest in Kente types that have developed out of ancestral traditions which embraces the fashions of the contemporary world.

Despite these developments toward further commercialisation of the Kente weaving industry, the young people in the community still do not show interest in Kente weaving. They are more interested in pursuing other professions. Kente weaving is still likely to be increased if there is more coaching, especially, in the field of development, design, management, information systems and telecommunications, supported by good governance and tourist management.

The Government's contribution has been to recognise the role the crafts play in community development and redevelopment through job creation and improving the quality of life. The enabling environment it creates has been to encourage communities promote cultural crafts as a "powerful economic engine that inspires innovation, creates jobs, and produces revenue. To ensure the growth and development of our cultural institutions and make them relevant to human development, democratic governance and national integration. And to enhance Ghanaian cultural life and develop cultural programmes to contribute to the nation's human development and material progress through heritage preservation, conservation, promotion and the use of traditional and modern arts and crafts to create wealth and alleviate poverty. Koutra, et al, (2012), suggest that capacity building can make a significant contribution toward achieving the development of viable and socially responsible economic activities and it is therefore desirable to incorporate capacity building into any developmental approach.

Through the collaboration of government, the chiefs and the Council of elders of the communities, Cultural Kente festivities have been propelled to boost economic development through heritage, preservation, creativity, and entrepreneurship in these communities. Another approach used by the government is the formulation of strong local leadership and NGO's aimed at incorporating the arts into local development through design education and leadership training during the *Kentefest* activities.

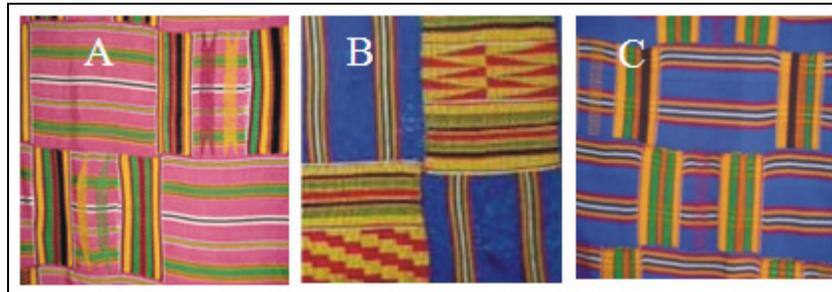


Figure 8A: *Frepomaa*, Figure 8B: *Agyegyensu*, Figure 8C: *Mmeda*  
 Courtesy weavers of *Wonoo*

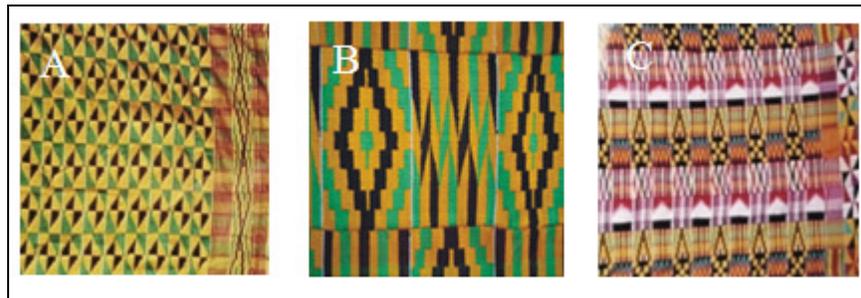


Figure 9A: *ApremuAdwinasa*. Figure 9B: *Adwinsiadwin so*. Figure 9C: *Adwinasamaban*  
 --Courtesy weavers of *Tewobeabi*

What government needs to do in addition, is to complement their self-effort by helping localities incorporate art into their community development plans through grants, technical assistance, and financial support and tax incentives. Incorporating art into community development plans is critical for ensuring the long-term sustainability of local efforts.

Figure 8A to 9C. Shows various Kente cloth types of traditional festivities and official gatherings of dignitaries displayed in the showroom of Centre for National Culture, Kumasi. In addition to the local market, the Kente showroom was established in 1980. Some of such products are exported to the United States, the Netherlands, Germany, and Canada.

#### 4. Conclusion

The weavers in these weaving communities still passed on the Kente weaving tradition complimented by written literature from the old to the new. Though many have inherited instinctual expertise and skills, others pass through recognised institutions of higher learning in Kente weaving and earn their living as weavers. In their work, they manage to combine the old and new values.

Traditional weavers still survive and have a separate market segment that co-exist along with the creative and innovative products of export quality. There is, however, a growing similarity between the traditional and the modern products. The peculiarity of Kente and the unique character of traditional weaving still persist with modernity.

Kente industrial centres are now more oriented towards meeting the needs of tourists in their bid to promote its rich cultural heritage. Due to extensive interaction and the positive response from the general public, Kente weavers of *Bonwire*, *Adawomase*, *Ntonso* and *Tewobeabi* are experiencing a unique and characteristic creative phase. The tourists negotiate the values between the old designs and the new designs and can find both royal traditional designs and new, creative and innovative Kente products of export quality. Additionally, the weaving centres lead themselves to commoditization and the sales of varied Kente weaving souvenirs in these sites.

Thus the unique characteristics of traditional weaving in terms of colour are gradually changing. This is due to the growing influence of the global market and the demands of standardization that come with it. Utilization of information and communication technology among intellectual Kente weavers is increasing. This, in turn, contributes to the development of the ideas about the importance of standardization as a guarantee of a global consumer demand and security. Designs and new techniques, then aim at meeting the market demand, product orientation, based solely on market tastes.

However, Cultural tourism in these clusters of towns has the potential to assist preserve and develop an indigenous Kente culture for many years to come. Undeniably, developing Kente culture would play a vital role in sustaining these cluster of Kente towns in preserving cultural values. Certainly, when the indigenous citizens benefit from cultural tourism growth, demand for better living environs tend to increase and invariable attracts the local citizenry to stay behind as the living environs improve.

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