



## TransAfrica Forum

### CLOTHING AS A CULTURAL EXPRESSION: AFRICAN FASHION

#### HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF CLOTH IN AFRICA

African clothing is known for its colorful fabrics and distinctive designs. But few people take the time to examine the cultural significance of African fashion. The presence of textiles in the African world dates back to Phoenician times.

At various times in history, migration, and integration have spread African textiles to different regions of Africa and the world. The colorful clothes of Africa first became a sign of wealth around 1000 BC during the period of the trans-Saharan trade when traders used strip cloth as a form of currency. As a result, African textiles became known worldwide. During the European coastal trade in the 1400's, African fabrics were preferred by traders over fine European fabrics. Traders used African cloth in the triangular trade of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. African traders exchanged cloth from India for European goods; Europeans then traded Indian cloth to Africans for gold.

The development of trade with the world established a ruling class in Africa, which in turn developed a need for luxury items. The quality and color of African textiles became an expression of wealth and knowledge in society and it became an indication of social hierarchy. The development of *kente* cloth in the Ashanti illustrates how the use of cloth differentiates people by status as fine *kente* cloth symbolizes leadership.

#### TYPES OF CLOTH

In order of tradition and value, 1) weaves, 2) tie dyes, 3) batiks, and 4) industrial prints represent the four

types of cloth Africans use to create clothing. Woven cloth, the oldest and most valuable type of fabric, is the most time consuming to make. Weaving represents a tradition that passes down from father to son and from uncle to nephew, and from mother to daughter and aunt to niece. The complexity of the weave, the color, and the type of thread used, determines the value of the fabric. The use of locally spun threads enhances the value of the cloth, as Africans believe that imported textiles have no ancestral link and therefore less value. Today, despite this belief, Africans sometimes use European manufactured thread to weave cloth.

*Bogolanfini*, *aso oke*, *kuba raffia*, *kente*, and country cloth offer examples of woven cloth. *Bogolanfini*, also known as *mud cloth*, is the traditional cloth from the countryside north of the Malian capital, Bamako. With rich blacks, browns, and whites, sections of cloths are composed of individual motifs or a combination of motifs such as "fish bones", "little stars", or "square".

*Aso oke*, a traditional cloth of the Yoruba, has three main designs: *etu*, a dark blue indigo dyed cloth (a verse from an Ifa divination text describes it as the "father of all cloths"); *sanyan*, a brown cloth woven from the beige silk of the Anaphe moth; and *alaari*, woven from Southern European silk obtained from the Sahara via Tripoli. For the Yoruba, cloth made completely of silk is rare. Strips of silk cloth are communally used as decoration for indigo dyed cloth.

*Kuba raffia*, the traditional cloth of the Kuba people of the Democratic Republic of Congo, remains an example of a tradition of raffia weaving that was once widespread throughout central Africa.

*Kente*, probably the best known of these, was worn by the political authorities and high-ranking officials of the Ashanti people presently found in Ghana. A colorful fabric of golds, yellows, reds, blacks, greens, and blues, each intricately designed piece of fabric is a functional object that conveys messages about historical and cultural landmarks, philosophical concepts, political thoughts, or religious and moral values of society.

The above are all examples of woven cloths. An example of tie-dye is *indigo cloth*. *Batik*s are cotton fabrics with designs painted on them using a wax technique. And industrial prints, such as wax prints, are cloths manufactured in Europe. *Batik*s and wax prints are more commonly used today in the creation of African clothing. Africans use them not just for everyday wear, but also for creating clothes for special ceremonies and events. The quality of the fabric and the complexity of the design differentiates everyday wear from formal wear.

#### COLOR

Colors in the cloths of African people possess important meaning. Meanings vary from people to people and cloth to cloth. For example, the Akan people in West Africa use dark colors such as red, black, and brown for funerals, while the Akon use white for joyous occasions, such as naming ceremonies. In *kente* cloth made by the Ashanti people of Ghana, who are also Akan, gold represents status

and serenity. Yellow represents fertility (like the ripeness of an egg yoke or a fruit) and vitality. Green signifies the renewal and growth seen in plants and represents the cycle of birth and decay. Blue represents the presence of God and the omnipotence of the blue sky. Blue also refers to a pure spirit, one which rests in harmony. Red connotes passion, the passion of political determination, struggle, and defense. Ashanti also believe that red holds protective powers. Finally, black denotes seriousness and a union with ancestors. It implies spiritual awareness.

## TYPES OF CLOTHING

Of course, at some point, fabric becomes clothing. Clothing traditions vary with each ethnic group. Each society has its own name for different types of clothing made out of traditional cloth particular to that people. However, one finds similarities across cultures. And with migration and interactions over time, ethnic groups have adapted and shared customs of dress.

Styles of clothing vary from the simple, plain shirt, and wrap; to the intermediate in which there is the beginning of design and slight detail; to complex, more detailed formal cloths. Clothes include tops, bottoms (trousers,  $\frac{3}{4}$  length pants, and shorts), and gowns (ankle, calve, and knee-length). Different groups have their own name for a particular piece of clothing. To illustrate, the Hausa call a top *riga*, a bottom *wando*, and a gown *buba riga*, while the Yoroba call a top *buba*, a bottom *sokoto*, and a gown *agbada*.

## FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN DRESS

Traditional use of the cloths for clothing differs with each group. People of the Mende in Sierra Leone, use country cloth for various ceremonial purposes including marriage gifts, burials, sacrifices, religious purposes, and gifts for visitors. In courtship, the groom or his relatives gives country cloth to the family of the bride as a gift. In burial, the gathering of country cloth helps to denote the kind of afterlife one will lead. Those who bury the dead must dress the deceased in white handspun threads and they place country cloth next to the body or at the bottom of the grave. Dressing the individual in white represents Moslem influence; the preparation for an afterlife parallels the Egyptian burial practice.

Traditionally, some cloths such as *kente* were used only by people of certain status or for particular ceremonies. Today, the Ashanti wear *kente* cloth outside of the court regalia. Men wear *kente* by wrapping a piece of cloth (on average 8 feet wide by 12 feet long) around themselves, leaving the right shoulder and hand uncovered. Women wear it wrapped around their body with or without a matching blouse. Cheaper versions of the cloth are made into shirts, dresses, and ties.

With the advent of modern fashions, *aso oke*, which was commonly worn by the Yoruba, is now worn only

during major life-cycle events such as naming ceremonies, engagements, weddings, and funerals, as well as for major religious ceremonies.

## CROSS CULTURAL INFLUENCES

African fashion has influenced and has been influenced by other cultures. Post-Renaissance Europe greatly admired the *raffia* of Central Africa and it found its way into European treasuries along with other creations of African art. *Raffia* designs were a source of inspiration to Matisse, who hung a large part of his collection on the wall of his studio.

Different styles of African fashion have evolved from the mixture of African and western cultures. African designers create clothes of western design using traditional African cloth. Hence, one sees *kente* ties and coats made from indigo cloth. Clothes of traditional African cut are fashioned using a combination of western and African cloth. Thus, one might see a *sora* (a woman's wrap skirt), made from jean material with accents of *bogolanfini* (*mud cloth*).

Today, African dress influences fashion throughout the world. From 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem, New York to a street in downtown London, women are wearing *bubas* (tops), *soras* (wrap skirts) and *geles* (head ties). African fashion has been adopted and adapted by Africans of the Diaspora. And, new events like the Highbury Dunbar in London, and fashion shows throughout Europe, now celebrate African culture and traditional and non-traditional African dress further illustrating the dynamic nature of African fashion.

**Sources:** Adire African Textiles. *African Textiles Gallery*.

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# African Clothiers

## African Clothing Stores

### ***Jenber D.***

2204 18<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 2009  
(202) 483-7017

### ***Kobos***

2444 18<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20009  
(202) 332-9580

### ***Paula's Imports***

2405 18<sup>th</sup> Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20009  
(202) 328-2176

### ***Swan's L.A. Expressions***

<http://www.swanslaexpressions.com/>  
8102 49<sup>th</sup> Avenue S.W.  
Lakewood, WA 98499  
(253) 475-4677

### ***TeKay Designs***

<http://store.tk-designs.com>

### ***Gallery Africa Online***

<http://www.galleryafrica.com/>

### ***Africa Imports***

<http://www.africaimports.com/store.clothing.html>

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## African Clothing Stores Online

### ***African Crafts Online***

<http://www.africancrafts.com/>