
SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BONWIRE KENTE AND DABOYA BENCHIBI

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ABSTRACT: *Benchibi and Kente are traditional woven fabrics ingeniously crafted with two different design concepts. Benchibi is produced by the people of Daboya in the Northern part of Ghana whilst Kente is a product mainly of the middle and southern part of Ghana with Bonwire as its traditional centre in the middle part of the country. The study aimed at analysing the socio-cultural significance of the two traditions. The study fulcrums on the qualitative research and employed observation and interview. The study analysed the socio-cultural characteristics of the two fabrics traditions, using descriptive method of analysing data. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select eight people, two (2) weavers and two (2) opinion leaders from each of the study area. The research revealed that both woven traditions are embedded with socio-cultural significance that embodies various characteristics such as values, morals, history and philosophies of the areas noted for the production and use of the fabrics. The study revealed that Benchibi and Kente have different beautiful crafted style in terms of weave, designs and materials used, which play very significant roles in the socio-cultural behaviour of the two traditions. The study concluded that both weaving cultures play very distinguished social and cultural roles in the lives of the people of the respective areas. It is therefore recommended that the physical features, aesthetic and artistic components of these weaving traditions need rigorous documentation to help in recording the social and cultural life of the people through fabric weaving.*

KEY WORDS: Kente, Benchibi, aesthetics, traditions, socio-cultural.

INTRODUCTION

Weaving is one of the media of art that the people of various ethnic groups use to portray their societal norms, values and philosophies in their communities. Among the famous communities in Ghana, Daboya and Bonwire are known for the production of woven cloths known as Benchibi and Kente respectively. Weaving is one of the main occupations of the Bonwire and Daboya people. Daboya is a prominent weaving centre in the Northern part of Ghana and the home of the famous and high-quality strip-woven cloth locally called 'gbanyewaja' or the 'kegbanyechibi' which means 'Gonja cloth'. This art of weaving is reputed to have been introduced to the village by a section of the inhabitants of Daboya called 'Baka-Ram-Baasi-Pe'. This handwoven cloth is used to make smock, traditionally known as 'batakari' or 'fugu'. The yarns are dyed with local dye (Mahama, 2013). Hand spun yarns were the main raw materials used for weaving in Daboya which produced fabrics that were rough surfaced and heavy in nature. Asinyo & Frimpong (2013) found that the history of weaving at Daboya is

believed to have pivoted around Sheriff, who was a Nigerian. Also, according to Mumuni, A. (personal communication April 28, 2019) of Daboya, weaving has been a native craft of the people in the community. The people of Daboya called the Wangara are believed to have migrated from Cote d'Ivoire but due to a civil war, they left Daboya for the Bolgatanga area. Over there, the indigenous people called them '*Bakarambasipe*' which means stranger (Asinyo & Frimpoong, 2013). They also reported that after the war, they came back to Daboya. Subsequently, Sheriff came from Nigeria to begin the art of weaving in Daboya. While Sheriff was weaving '*Bakarambasipe*' people were dyeing the yarns for the weavers Kente is a centuries-old tradition of stripe woven fabric which was inspired by the demands of royalty, ceremony and the aesthetic taste of the wealthy (Adler & Barnard, 1995). Ofori-Ansah (2012) argues that kente is a ceremonial cloth handwoven on a loom that is worn during special, social and religious occasions.

Asihene (1978) and Asmah (2004) affirm that although Kente, as known to be developed in the 17th Century A.D. by the Ashanti people, has its roots in a long tradition of weaving in Africa dating back to about 3000 B.C. By these authors, the origin of Kente is explained with both a legend and historical accounts. Legend has it that a man named Ota Kraban and his friend Kwaku Ameyaw from the town of Bonwire (now the leading Kente weaving centre in Ashanti), had the knowledge of the art of weaving by observing a spider weaving its web. Taking a cue from the spider, they wove a strip of raffia fabric and later improved upon their skill. They reported their discovery to their chief Nana Bobie, who in turn reported it to the Asantehene (The Ashanti King) at that time. The Asantehene adopted it as a royal cloth and encouraged its development as a cloth of prestige reserved for special occasions. Nonetheless, Ofori-Ansa (2012) on historical accounts traces the origin of Kente weaving to early weaving traditions in ancient West African Kingdoms that flourished between 300 A.D. and 1600 A.D. According to Ofori-Ansa (2012), some historians maintain that Kente, is an outgrowth of various weaving traditions that existed in West Africa prior to the formation of the Ashanti Kingdom in the 17th Century.

Many features of such cloths appear in the early and later narrow-strip cloths woven in Ashanti. Asamoah-Yaw (1999) asserts that most of the weavers interviewed at Bonwire and elsewhere have speculated that an Ashanti king travelled to the Northern Region of Ghana to meet the Moshie Chief who was dressed in a magnificent woven cloth. The Ashanti king was so fascinated about the Moshie Chief's woven cloth and asked the Moshie Chief to travel to Ashanti Region with the weaver to weave the same cloth for him. The weaver was permitted to travel to Ashanti Region with the Moshie Chief to be the Ashanti King's weaver. It is believed that the weaver settled at Bonwire and taught the village people how to weave cloth. There is no evidence as to where the weaver settled nor is there a recollection of any single weaver whose ancestor learnt his trade from a Moshie weaver. It could be deduced that there was no Moshie weaver and if there was such a Moshie weaver at all, he never settled in Bonwire. Given these historical accounts, it is believed that the Ashanti craftsmen might have learned weaving skills from other people's living north of them and later developed their unique style of cloth.

Like Kente, Benchibi was entirely reserved for chiefs, traditional priest, holders of sacred and high traditional and royal office. Asante and Daboya rulers and attendants or entourage sit in ceremonies and festivals attired usually in Kente and Fugu, but now Kente and Benchibi are worn by anyone who can afford it for any occasion (Benson, 2002). These and many more have influenced the use of these woven fabrics. These two weaving traditions have very unique narrative historical accounts as enumerated by Appiah-Kusi (2013), Asamoah-Yaw (1999) and Asmah 2004. Ofori-Ansah (2012), sums up, that Benchibi and Kente display the historical, political and cultural prominence of the Ghanaian society. At a glimpse of the Benchibi and Kente cloth, one perceives the vital socio-cultural significance apart from seeing their exquisiteness. What is silent about these studies on Benchibi and Kente cloths is that, little or nothing has been done on the social and cultural significance of these two weaving traditions. The social and cultural significance consist of community and association, rites and ceremonies, beliefs and taboos, linguistics and communication which form the basic tenets of every community's social and cultural behaviour. What is also important is how the socio-cultural significance have influenced the inhabitants in their quest for maintaining the beliefs, values, norms and psychological behaviours within their settings. It is upon these premise that this study is conducted with the view of analysing the various social and cultural significance of these two woven traditions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study hinges on Object-based attention theory and material culture theory. Object-based attention theory as suggested by Duncan, (1984) refers to the relationship between an 'object' representation and a person's visually stimulated, selective attention. It also employs to prioritizing the processing of information in the environment at a particular moment. The theory relates to the creation of kente and benchibi as art objects that has relationship with the communities that produced and use them. The Material culture theory is usually considered to be roughly synonymous with artefacts that provide information about human behaviour. It is the study through artefacts of the beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time. The study used this theory as grounded on Lewis Henry Morgan's study in the mid-19th century which is connected to the effect of technology, on the evolution of a society and the physical objects, resources, and spaces that people use to define their culture. These objects are used by humans to cope with the physical world, to facilitate social interaction, and to benefit state of the mind. The kente and Benchibi as art objects play significant roles that facilitates the social and cultural interactions of the people. It is based on these grounds that the object-based attention and the material culture theories were used to underpin the study.

METHODOLOGY

The study fulcrums on the qualitative research approach with historical and descriptive research methods. Qualitative research is characterised by its aims, which relate to understanding some aspect of social life, and its methods which, in general generate words,

rather than numbers, as data for analysis (Patton & Cochran, 2002). Thomas (2003) explains qualitative studies as those in which the descriptions of observation are terms mostly used. This method also seeks to answer questions as to what the actual facts are with regard to the existing conditions. This premise provided the researcher the design tool for the study. Purposive sampling was used for this study. Purposive sampling is referred to by Marshall (1996) as a judgment or judgmental sampling. Kothari (2004) asserts that items in the sample are selected deliberately by the researcher; the choice of the researcher remains supreme. With these in mind, it was necessary that people with knowledge about these unique crafts were selected to provide information for the study, hence, the purposive sampling technique. Weavers and opinion leaders in Daboya and Bonwire constituted the target population for the study. Being too large to effectively study, the researcher selected two (2) weavers and two (2) opinion leaders from each of the two traditions for in-depth study. The study adopted the direct-non-participatory observation technique for the study. An observation guide was used to systematically record relevant data for the study. Vital data was obtained through this technique which also helped in the verification and nullification of the data provided in the face-to-face interviews. The semi structured interview was also used to obtain data for the study. It provided the researcher the freedom to probe the interviewee to elaborate on an original response or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee (Partington, 2001). Document review was employed to gather information on the historical component of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The discussions are based on the main objective of the study, thus examining the socio-cultural significance of these unique weaving cultures of Bonwire Kente and Daboya Benchibi on the following, community and association, rites and ceremonies, beliefs and taboos, linguistics and communication which forms the basic tenets of every community's social and cultural behaviour.

Community and Association

It was observed that weaving was done in Bonwire and Daboya in groups. However; individuals were also observed weaving solely. According to the respondents, the groups were usually families, friends, associations, master and apprentices and ethnic groups. It was observed that the families and friends weaving together in Daboya were of the same religious affiliation (Islam). Meanwhile, other families and friends weaving together in Bonwire were not necessarily of the same religious affiliation. Some of the weavers were of the same ethnic groups. It was observed in Bonwire that a group of Ewes were weaving together. Another group of weavers were of the same religious affiliation. Individuals were also seen weaving alone. An association which comprises of people of different ethnic groups namely, Grusi, Dagomba, Ewes, Ga, and Asante were also observed weaving together. Some respondents prefer weaving in a group since this helps the weavers to weave faster, get corrected when wrong, get entertained and encouraged by others during weaving meanwhile others fancy to weave alone in order not to be distracted by others.

The foregoing discourse shows that weavers in Bonwire and Daboya mostly group themselves when weaving and the groups can be persons of the same family, ethnic group or religious background. In spite of this, it is not prohibited to weave alone, especially, if one can weave better under that circumstance. The preference for weaving in a group or alone is therefore dependent on the individual weaver weighing the advantages of the choice. The study discloses that the weaving tradition in Bonwire and Daboya is passed on from one generation to the other. Hence, weaving is handed on from grandfather to father to son as Asante (2005) confirms, saying that usually traditional weaving is handed down in the family lineage. The grouping as mentioned above reveals that the mode of acquisition of skills in the weaving industry within Bonwire and Daboya is through inheritance and apprenticeship.

Weaving has effects and encourages communal living since the group of weavers assists one another in various circumstances. Weaving with the same group of religious affiliation helps to strengthen the faith of the group. There are other associations and groups made up of different people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds who live together in the communities. This is also an indication that there is peaceful coexistence between and among the people of Bonwire and Daboya through the weaving culture. Weaving promotes peace, unity and tranquillity among the people. Weaving in these communities is not a preserve of the natives. Everybody within the community can also learn and weave Kente or Benchibi.

Rites and Ceremonies

Respondents expressed that Kente and Benchibi are worn during special occasions such as marriage ceremonies, child naming ceremonies, funerals, graduations and passing out ceremonies. Respondents emphasized that a man is expected to provide nice and quality Kente and Benchibi to the wife during marriage ceremonies, child naming ceremonies and child dedication at church.

From the respondents, Kente and Benchibi play vital role in the birth rites of an individual. The respondents continued that during the naming, outdoor and dedication ceremonies of a new born baby, the parents, family members and well-wishers can choose to wear Kente or Benchibi. Kente or Benchibi can be used to wrap the baby during those ceremonies. They added that if a woman gives birth, it is expected that she goes out in Kente or Benchibi usually in white among the people of Bonwire, to announce to others, the safe delivery of the new born baby and that both the mother and child are alive and well.

Respondents opined that during marriage ceremonies, the bride and the groom wear Kente and Benchibi as well as family members and well-wishers to grace the occasion. Newlyweds wear Kente and Benchibi to indicate that they are a fresh couple. Respondents revealed that Kente and Benchibi are among the items presented to the woman and the family during the marriage ceremony in Bonwire and Daboya. It is a requirement to include Kente and Benchibi in the items for the bride's family to endorse the marriage.

A respondent from Bonwire said

“Kente is not the traditional mourning cloth of the Asantes yet few Kente cloth woven in black, red, dark brown are used as mourning cloth.

The dead is sometimes laid in state with Kente. In some cases, they are used to decorate the room where the corpse is being laid in state". This is also same at Daboya as another respondent remarked that "white Benchibi is used to wrap the corpse of Muslims while the dead among the Christian is laid in state with Benchibi. Coffins might have pieces of Benchibi laid over them as they are used to bury the respected in the society".

Respondents agreed that kings, chiefs, sub-chiefs and elders wear Kente and Benchibi during durbars and gatherings. They went further to state that Bonwire Kente and Daboya Benchibi are not used by chiefs and elders of the respective towns alone but also used by the Akan and Gonja kings at large. A respondent from Bonwire disclosed that "during the installation process of the chiefs and kingmakers of Bonwire, they do not put on Kente but a cloth called 'Kuntunkuni'. However, after the installation of a chief, the newly installed chief is presented to the community in a colourful Kente durbar." Likewise, a respondent from Daboya, agreed to the assertion that

".....the Benchibi plays an important role in Daboya and the rest of Gonja land. Kingmakers wear fugu (smock) made of the Benchibi during the enskinment process. The king or chief is robed in a white fugu during the final process. After the enskinment, the newly installed king or chief wears a white fugu to sit in the palace to receive homage. An all-white smock is worn by the king or chief to signify a blissful and joyous occasion. The newly installed chief is pleased because of the power bestowed upon him. The chief and elders wear Benchibi during funerals, durbars and festivals".

Again, another respondent from Daboya, said that

"before one is enskinned as queen mother, the individual has to get the kingmakers of the land a Daboya Benchibi before a date is given to the king for the enskinning ceremony. During the enskinning ceremony, the queen mother sits on a mat in front of the king and elders of the land and the king makers will wrap the queen mother with the Daboya Benchibi".

Respondents from both communities agreed that traditional leaders display Kente and Benchibi during the Kente and Adaye festivals among the Bonwire indigenes and Damba festivals among the people of Daboya. Again, respondents stated that during the graduation and passing out ceremonies, Kente and Benchibi are utilised. Graduates order Kente and Benchibi to wear to their graduation ceremonies. They emphasized that folks from Daboya and Bonwire wear the Benchibi and Kente respectively as forms of identification as belonging to the community.

The study found that Kente and Benchibi are utilized in different occasions and ceremonies such as child-naming ceremony, marriage, funeral, graduation, thanksgiving, festival and durbar. Kente and Benchibi play a role in the birth of a child in Bonwire and Daboya. For instance, Kente can be used as clothing items worn by the parents, family as well as well-wishers during the naming and dedication ceremonies and even the baby can be clad and

wrapped in Kente and Benchibi. The announcement of the arrival of a new-born can be made through the use of Benchibi and Kente. In marriage ceremony of Bonwire and Daboya, Kente and Benchibi are mandatory requirement presented to the bride and the family apart from being worn by the bride, groom, family as well as well-wishers.

It was found out that Kente is not the mourning cloth of the Asantes and for that matter, the people of Bonwire. Bonwire Kente woven in the mourning colours of the Asantes (which is red, black and dark brown) is seldom woven to serve as the mourning cloth in Bonwire. If mourners are not wearing Kente, the deceased may however be laid in state or be buried in Kente as a symbol of respect for the departed soul as stated by Appiah-Kusi (2013). However, Daboya Benchibi is prevalently used by natives during funerals. In some cases, the Kente and Benchibi may be used to decorate the place where the corpse lies for public viewing. Benchibi is similarly used on corpse.

From the study, the relevance of Bonwire Kente and Daboya Benchibi can be made manifest in festivals. Festivals (Adaye and Kente Festivals of Bonwire and Damba Festival of Daboya) when celebrated, see the display of the Bonwire Kente and Daboya Benchibi as Adu (1998) supports that festivals celebrated by the Akan are graced with dignitaries wearing Kente. Ahiabor (2013) affirms that festivals were seen with natives wearing smock made of Benchibi. Kente has led to the introduction of the Kente festival in Bonwire. The Kente festival is celebrated to honour the originators of Kente and to promote the Kente weaving industry.

It was established that not only is Kente and Benchibi used among the natives of Bonwire and Daboya but the rest of the Asante and Gonja Kingdoms. Kente and Benchibi are mostly seen in public during the magnificent range of festivals that periodically illuminate most southern and Northern part of Ghana. Festivals are times of homecoming, thanksgiving, family reunion and excursion. The wearing of Kente is not just used by adults. Children also adore themselves with Kente and Benchibi on such occasions as supported by Sabutey (2009).

Beliefs and Taboos

From the field, respondents said, contemporary happenings has watered down the beliefs and taboos associated with the weaving of the cloth. Respondents explained that this is as a result of development and changes in faith and belief systems of the community. Nonetheless, the various weavers' associations have their own rules and regulation concerning punctuality, welfare of members and conduct of members. The respondents agreed that the elders of the town always advise them to desist from practices that will bring down the image of the weaving industry in Bonwire and Daboya.

This indicates that the beliefs and taboos correlating to weaving are all in the past, hence there are no superstitions and irrational beliefs regarding the weaving of Bonwire Kente and Daboya Benchibi contrary to the assertion of Tettehfiio (2009) that weaving in the Ghanaian society has mysterious beliefs linked with it. This may be associated with modernism, civilisation and religion. Ahiabor (2004) confirms that urbanisation, economic factors and Christianity have collectively brought about a revolution in weaving in Ghana and the gradual corrosion of taboos and rites associated with weaving. Moreover, most weavers profess Christianity and

Islam religions although they are from a lineage of weavers who were adherent to traditional religion. Those weavers have either shed off their old beliefs or are not prepared to practice those beliefs linked with weaving. To most of the present generation of weavers, the ancient beliefs associated with weaving of Kente and Benchibi are just old dogmas that have less relevance and meaning to the practical work.

Linguistics and Communication

From the respondents, Bonwire Kente and Daboya Benchibi attract tourists, so weavers and especially sellers speak some amount of English in order to communicate with foreigners even if the weaver has not been to school. According to respondents, the cloths are assigned names and one can wear a particular cloth to send a message across. For instance, someone puts on a Kente clothe named '*osikani*' (wealthy person) or '*sika ne barima*' (money makes man) to tell people that the individual is wealthy and therefore should be accorded the needed respect. Again, one can buy a Kente named '*obaapa*' (good women) to a mother, wife or sister to appreciate the woman's goodness. A respondent from Daboya gave the example that '*kayintuwala*' (patient is good) is worn by a woman on her wedding day or wedding Thanksgiving Day to put across the message that it pays to wait and that the patience exercised by the woman has landed her a good husband.

It was found out that due to Bonwire Kente and Daboya Benchibi, weavers have been influenced and encouraged to learn how to communicate in English language in order to interact and transact business with tourists who are usually foreigners. The existence of the weaving industry in Bonwire and Daboya has helped some weavers and traders to learn how to interact amiably with people thereby improving the interrelation speaking skills and mannerism of the weavers and traders. Also, Kente and Benchibi serve as a means of communication. This is to say that one can convey a message across through the use of a particular Kente or Benchibi. Kente and Benchibi can be used as a mode of communication as confirmed by Appiah-Kusi (2013).

Implication to Research and Practice

By implication, this paper is promoting the social and cultural traditions that are embedded in the use of woven artefacts, Kente and Benchibi (two uniquely crafted weaving traditions in Ghana) as the basis for the study. It is a common knowledge that, artefacts such as sculpture, pottery, jewellery, leatherworks and so on that are produced in every community have significant influence on the people. There are evidence on how they are utilized in various social and cultural traditions. Scholars (Sabutey, 2009; Asare, 2012; Dzramado & Dabuo; 2015) have done extensive studies on the weaving traditions in Ghana that hinged on the weaving processes, tools, materials and equipment and functional purposes of the fabrics. What this study brings to the fore is that, these two indigenous weaving traditions, Kente and Benchibi, have specific social and cultural significance that positively affects the people through their inherent values, norms and psychological impacts. This study zeros in to reveal the socio-cultural impacts of its weavers and designers.

CONCLUSIONS

The study focused on analysing the social and cultural significance of Daboya Binchibi and Bonwire Kente. The study concludes that both weaving cultures play very distinguished social and cultural roles in the lives of the people of the respective areas. Socially both traditions utilise the products in various rites and ceremonies in efforts to maintaining their culture. The study further concludes also, that one aspect of the social significance that has affected the communities positively is linguistic and communication. The weavers have learnt to communicate in some amount of English language in order to interact and transact business with tourists who are usually foreigners who visit the communities. Culturally the tradition of weaving which used to be the preserve of men in the past due to strict adherence to taboos and beliefs and other norms are no more followed due to social interaction and modernity. Efforts must be made by the opinion leaders in community to continue the various social and cultural uses of the magnificent artefacts and consciously promote them. The weavers should be encouraged by their leaders and the opinion leaders to continue learning the English language as this serves as the medium of communication when tourist visit their working places. The study recommends that the physical features, aesthetic and artistic components of these weaving traditions need rigorous documentation to help in recording the social and cultural life of the people through fabric weaving. Then also, these weaving traditions should be upheld to serve as a unique trademark and legacy for both communities which in turn contributes to the social and cultural development of the people.

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