KENTE CLOTH IN AFRICA AND NORTH AMERICA

Defense attorney John T. Harvey III... yesterday... walked resolutely into D.C. Superior Court wearing a multicolored kente cloth stole, an emblem of West African royalty and black pride.—Andrew Brownstein, “Showdown Over Kente Cloth,” The Washington Post, June 12, 1992

The brightly colored cloth known as kente, whose complex patterns have been imbued with cultural significance in West Africa for several centuries, is now widely in evidence in the United States. Originally made by the Asante people of Ghana, kente (pronounced ken-tay) developed when royal artisans in the seventeenth century began to unravel imported silk trade cloth and to apply ancient traditions in reweaving the threads into a distinctive fabric reserved for the Asante king and members of his court. Specific kente patterns were used in traditional Asante culture to identify the wearer’s rank and status within a finely delineated social hierarchy. Today, kente is largely a symbol of national pride in Ghana, where it is worn by many people on festive occasions.

Kente cloth is woven in 3- to 5-inch-wide strips on a double-heddle loom. Finished strips are edge-sewn to produce fabric of the necessary width: a man’s garment—which is worn wrapped around the body and draped over the left shoulder—is made by sewing together about twenty strips. At the time of its creation, each kente cloth pattern is given a name that commemorates a historic event, refers to a proverb, or captures the thoughts and feelings of the weaver. One particularly elaborate weave, for example, is known as adwene, which translates loosely as “I am exhausted.”

Kente cloth has been popular in America for several decades, but demand increased significantly in the 1980s. Today, U.S. department stores offer a variety of clothing, jewelry, and household objects inspired by kente motifs. Kente apparel is used on many black dolls, which have played an important role in teaching children about their ethnic heritage and instilling pride and self-esteem. Kente is also worn in some churches as an expression of unity and African American consciousness.

While kente has always functioned as a political emblem in the court hierarchy of the Asante, its political potency has also become evident in America. In 1992, John T. Harvey III, a black defense attorney, was ordered by a white judge to remove the kente stole he customarily wore around his suit collar or lose his client’s right to a trial by jury in Washington D.C. Superior Court. The judge contended that the kente pattern could influence the fairness of a trial by creating an unspoken ethnic bond between the lawyer, his client, and certain members of the jury. As noted in the quotation at the top of this article, Harvey refused to comply with the court’s order.

Like a thread connecting generations of Africans and African Americans through space and time, kente cloth chronicles, with resonant splendor, a history of ethnic identity and cultural heritage—on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Examples of kente from Africa and America are currently featured in a small exhibition on the ground floor of the Museum of Natural History in Exposition Park.

Top:
Detail of kente cloth, eighteenth century. Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, FA.2202.79-5. Photograph by Dan Watson.

Left:

Right: