



Conservation of African Craft through Art Entrepreneurship: Case Study of Kente Craft.

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Abstract

This article discussed how Kente cloth has been able to remain relevant despite the influence of civilization. Kente is a symbol of African identity which significantly supports the economic development of Ghana. Although this craft is an age-long Ghanaian textile craft, it has defied the negative impact of civilization on most African indigenous crafts. The study focused on the value of arts and crafts to African nations' economies. It was intended to draw attention to the factors that have sustained the Kente craft so as to serve as a springboard for the preservation of other African crafts. The article was approached with a review research design method using primarily secondary means of data collection. It was observed that Kente cloth designs have been conserved and transformed into everyday objects which is been patronised by both indigenous and foreign cultures. Kente designs are more visible in the international market than other African traditional cloths. This visibility is traceable to the joint efforts of art entrepreneurs, Kente weaving communities and the government. It was recommended that art entrepreneurs in other African countries should create a platform to learn from their Ghanaian counterparts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Arts and Crafts are industrial mass projects in most developing countries especially African countries. The profits of Arts and Crafts are not well derived in the present National Development Plan of most African countries including Nigeria and Ghana. The emphasis on development is directed more to crude oil and other valuable mineral resources [1]. African arts and crafts are important to the society because they have both aesthetic and utilitarian significance. Africa is blessed with abundant agricultural, mineral and also numerous Arts and Crafts resources which when fully and adequately harnessed will provide sources of income for the teeming unemployed people and serve as alternative source of income for some underemployed citizens [2].

Most African Communities have a long history of interacting with their natural surroundings, which has allowed them to accumulate a variety of knowledge about the use of tangible and intangible natural resources for the benefit of mankind [3]. Arts and Crafts originated from man's desire to improve the world by utilizing natural resources for functional and aesthetic purposes. Nature provides abundant natural resources that could be harnessed by man for arts and crafts. Arts and Crafts could serve as potential springboard for sustainable development in any given economy. However, there is a gradual drop in the awareness of the significance, value and potentials of Arts and Crafts in the everyday life. This is demonstrated in the preference for machine-made products more than hand-made objects regardless their durability and high standard of workmanship. It is on this note that this study highlighted the potentials of art entrepreneurship for the conservation and sustenance of Arts and Craft using Kente

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craft as a case study. The study focused on the importance of arts and crafts on the economy of African countries. The aim was to highlight the factors responsible for the sustenance of Kente craft so as to serve as a reference for the preservation of other african crafts such as *aso-oke* and *adire* among others.

2.METHODOLOGY

Review research method was adopted for this research using secondary data collection approach. Existing literatures relevant to the topic were carefully reviewed and discussed. The literatures reviewed were carefully selected based on the originality of their contents and relevance to the study. Some of the literatures reviewed were retrieved from the databases of University of Ghana and University of New Brunswick. Literatures were also retrieved from reputable journals and online sources which are adequately cited and referenced. and The research focused on general arts and crafts in Ghana, Kente craft, art entrepreneurship and conservation and sustenance of craft.

3. ART ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND ART CONSERVATION

Art entrepreneurship involves the fusion of artistic creativity with business strategies, enabling artists to navigate the art market, innovate, and create sustainable enterprises while preserving their creative integrity. On the other hand, art conservation encompasses the meticulous preservation, restoration, and safeguarding of artworks to ensure their authenticity, historical value, and longevity. These interconnected fields collectively enrich the art world: art entrepreneurship propels artists' economic sustainability and cultural innovation, while art conservation safeguards the continuity of artistic heritage and fosters appreciation across generations [4].

3.1 Art Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship plays a major role in a country's economic development in the aspect as it job creation and social welfare [5-6]. Entrepreneurial activities are major drivers of transformation and development especially the creative and craft industry. This industry has the capacity to create more jobs for the teeming unemployed people in most developing countries, especially in Africa [7].

Smagina and Ludviga [8] noted that there are different types of entrepreneurships. They highlighted social entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneurship, creative entrepreneurship and art entrepreneurship among others. According to Smagina and Ludviga [8], these different categories of entrepreneurship are defined based on the distinctive nature of entrepreneurial intentions and actions needed to produce different goods or services. Doren and Thomas [9] stated that art entrepreneurship is currently experiencing a revitalization. Global trends show that the industrial economy is giving room for a new type of economy which is focuses on creativity, art and innovation based on demand for novel goods and services with high intangible value. Smagina and Ludviga [8] further stated that art entrepreneurship is a knowledge-intensive and resource-saving endeavour which has a high potential of growing the craft sector of the economy. Art entrepreneurship is the process of earning a living through the production or merchandising of artworks. Hence, an art entrepreneur is a person who earns a living from the production or sales of artworks or artefacts [10]. Gangi [11] opined that art entrepreneurship is about value creation and serves as a financial pillar allowing creative entrepreneurs to positively influence the economy.

3.2 Classification of Art Entrepreneurship Values

1.Economic Value

Gangi [11] opined that the most important value created through art entrepreneurship is economic value. This is because artefacts have high financial value attached to their functional characteristics, uniqueness and aesthetics.

2.Regenerative Value

Gangi [11] also noted that art entrepreneurs enjoy regeneration benefits when they take part in national events, seminars, workshops and festivals organized in different cities and rural locations. These events

draw the attention of people to these places, thus facilitating the development of these locations. Art entrepreneurs are instrumental to community development through tourism. Art entrepreneurship has a positive ripple effect on other businesses as they enjoy increased sales and better visibility.

3.Environmental Value

Researches have also shown that most art entrepreneurs use local, environmentally friendly materials for the production of their artefacts. This therefore enable artists and entrepreneurs to produce eco-friendly crafts and artefacts. Walley and Taylor [12] noted that eco-friendly artefacts contributes to the achievement of a sustainable society.

4.Educational Value

Art entrepreneurship also serves educational purposes because it fosters training and transferring knowledge from crafts masters or senior artists to their apprentices. The apprenticeship system is a non-formal method of education, the transfer of knowledge in this method must be done properly so that important details are not lost over time.

5.Social Value

Human beings are social beings that relate together in groups. Art entrepreneurs most times establish small-scale companies and they spend time with other artists craft makers to practice and learn from one another. Art entrepreneurs provide social value by creating employment opportunities, referrals, and sales of products.

According to Smagina and Ludviga [8], other types of value created through art entrepreneurship are aesthetic, heritage, artistic, symbolic and developmental values.

3.3 Art and Craft in Ghana

Intangible cultural heritage is a major source of decent employment for people in traditional communities. This can be in terms of preserving built heritage and promoting of traditional handicrafts for local economic development [3]. Arts and crafts are forms of human expression that mirrors the history and describes the customs of a group of people. They are tools for Global development. Historical records show that artists and craftsmen are major influencers of the economy most developing countries [13]. Arts and crafts form the frame of reference and shapes the thought patterns of people in relating with the past, present and future [13]. Littrell et al. [14] stated that Ghana is a country rich in numerous arts and crafts. Before colonization, Ghanaian fine artists and craftsmen were great inventors and technocrats. However, the introduction of formal education, foreign religion, and other social factors has reduced the value attached to arts and crafts in Ghana to great extent.

Littrell et al. [14] opined that arts and crafts have great potentials to create wealth in Ghana and other African countries. Even though it is difficult to track general global statistics, many countries have individual statistical records of the impact of arts and crafts to their economies. According to Barbados Investment and Development Corporation [15], Ghanaian's arts and crafts exports was about US\$1000 in the early 1990s but has recorded impressive performances over the years from US\$2m export earnings in 1995 which increased to US\$15million in the early 2000s. Arts and crafts contributes immensely to the GDP of most African country through export, tourism and employments and trade activities in art galleries and craft Villages [13]. For instance in Winneba, Ghana, arts and crafts such as Pottery, "Gyapacoalpot" and crucibles, Ceramics wares production serves as the source of livelihood for over 73 workers that are breadwinners of their respective families. Essel [13] noted that textile craft is a major item Ghana craft market with Kente being the major textile craft whose production has been sustained over the years.

4. KENTE ARTEFACT

Ofori-Ansa [16] described weaving as an art that involves using locally sourced materials like yarn and raffia to produce artefacts and fabrics for casual or ceremonial use. Traditional woven artefacts produced in Ghana include baskets, and mats and Kente among others. However, Kente has gained prominence over the other woven traditional products and textile crafts due to the usage and value attached to the cloth. Kente weaving process is similar to the weaving process of traditional fabrics by interlacing two sets of threads/yarn to form a cloth. The distinction between Kente and other traditional woven fabric is the mathematical use of colour and the use of double weave weaving technique [17]. Figure 1 shows the weaving process of a kente cloth.



Figure1. Kente Weaving, [18]

Kente weaving in Africa dates far back to the 500 BC and 300 AD when different drawings and archaeological images were made in Nile Valley in Egypt [16]. It is a sacred cloth that depicts royalty, which was formerly worn only by kings and their chiefs. Although it is now accessible by non-royals, it is still a cloth of high value among the Akans and Ghanaians at large. Agboaye [17] noted that although Kente is believed to have originated from the Ashanti people in Ghana in the 11th century A.D., records also have it that Kente cloth has its roots in the long weaving tradition of Africa dating far back to 3000 B.C. The Akans (Fante, Asante and Akyem) in Ghana and the Akan groups in Cote d'Ivoire are well known for the production and elaborate use of Kente fabrics. Figure 2 shows an example of Kente fabric.



Figure 2. Kente Cloth, [19]

Kente cloth is not only a textile but a masterpiece of artistic expression deeply rooted in African culture. Its status as art goes beyond its visual aesthetics; it encompasses the cultural narratives, craftsmanship, and symbolism embedded within its intricate patterns and vibrant colors [17]. Kente patterns and colours holds a rich narrative and symbolic meaning. Weavers communicate cultural values, proverbs, historical events, and personal stories through these symbols. Each piece of kente becomes a visual story, allowing wearers and viewers to interpret and appreciate the deeper layers of meaning woven into the fabric [17]. Kente cloth has inspired various art forms beyond weaving. It has influenced paintings, sculptures, literature, and music, reflecting its cultural resonance. Artists from different disciplines draw inspiration from kente's colors, patterns, and symbolism to create their own interpretations. Figure 3 shows a Kente inspired painting.



Figure 3. Kente inspired painting [20]

4.1 Symbolic Meaning of Kente

Kente, like other articles of clothing have several uses and functions in different tribes and communities. It serves as a means of Identification of the wearer with a particular group and also dissociates them from a group [21]. Like other African traditional textiles, Kente serves as a symbol of communication that tells a lot about the status, social belonging and philosophy of the wearer. On special occasions and ceremonies, Kente serves as the official wear for chiefs in Southern Ghana and most especially among the Asantehenes. Kente colours and patterns are often used symbolically to specifically construct the identity of individuals and tribes among the people.

The Asante and Ewe are the prominent Kente weaving tribes in Ghana. The Asante tribe is associated with bright colours depicted in variant geometric shape designs while Ewe Kente usually have pictorial representations with white effects [21]. The colour and pattern of Kente a person wears partly tells the tribe where the person belongs.

Magee [22] noted that Kente serves as a medium for the identification of individuals' role in the society. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, promoted the recognition of Kente within and outside Ghana to a point that Kente became a symbol of Ghana's identity as an independent nation not just for the Asantes and Ewes. Kente is also used by individuals to show gender difference, social status, political associations and emotional states among others. This is because there are some designs that depicts masculinity and femininity. When these patterns are used by the wrong gender, they are usually ridiculed [23].

The type of Kente an individual wears describes the social standing of the person. The highly influential individuals usually wear the original hand-woven Kente rather than machine woven or printed imitations which are produced outside Ghana. Kente also serves political purposes. For instance, members of the New Patriotic Party in Ghana will rather use red, white and blue Kente rather than red,

black, white and green Kente used by their arch opposition, the National Democratic Congress. *Kuffour Apagya Ghana* and *Alan Cash* designs are also linked to the New Patriotic Party.

Kente patterns and colours also reflect the emotional state of the wearer. For instance, the *Asante* people wear the Kente design locally known as *owuo sei fie* which literally means 'death destroys families' for funerals and not joyful celebrations or ceremonies while the Kente design known as *sika futuro* which literally means 'gold dust' is worn during festivals and joyful ceremonies.

Kente symbolizes the African identity globally. In the United States of America, some Black Nationalist and liberation movements used the Kente cloth to identify with their African heritage and struggle. According to Asamoah [24], Kente cloth used to be tied as mantras meaning 'Black Power' and 'Black is Beautiful'. Kente is also used as uniforms during holidays and events such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Black History Month and the Kwanzaa festival. Clergies in some black dominated congregations often wear Kente in private and public gatherings to express their African legacy and Christian faith [24].

4.2 Aesthetics and Functional Usage of Kente

Appiah [25] opined that Kente is more valuable than just a cloth to the Ashanti people. It is a visual representation of the culture, philosophy, history, oral literature, social value, political values and religious beliefs of the people. Kente cloth is a sacred ceremonial cloth that was not to be worn as a casual wear for daily activities. Agboaye [17] however noted that increase in production has also increased the access of commoners and non-royals to the cloth as long as they can afford it. According to Boateng [26], a very high quality Kente cloth for men's garment from Bonwire could be estimated to cost about a thousand Canadian dollars.

Appiah [25] noted that apart from the royal usage of Kente cloth, it is also used during child naming, puberty celebration, marriage, graduation, and soul washing ceremonies. Kente also serves as a symbol of reverence and honour for the dead during burial and remembrance ceremonies. Kente cloth also used to distinguish individuals of high status during festival celebrations and remembrance of historical events such as the annual Independence day celebrations.

According to Agboaye [15], the following factors influence the usage, size, quality and pattern of Kente one may wear: marital status, age and social status among others. Agboaye [17] further highlighted that there are gender differences in the use of Kente cloth in terms of size and style. An average man's size cloth measures 24 strips that is 8 ft. wide and 12 ft. long. The men use one piece of Kente wrapped around the body, leaving only the right hand uncovered from the shoulder, this is similar to the way ancient Greek men wore the Toga. In recent time, some men also prefer to wrap it over a T-shirt, and this form is referred to as 'jumpa-like' style. The women either wear a large piece or combine two to three pieces of different sizes. Women use between 5-12 strips which is about 20 to 48 inches wide and about 6ft. long. They normally wrap the cloth round their bodies with a matching blouse and sometimes with a neutral blouse. Women of high social status, such as, the queen and queen mothers, usually wear just one large piece like the men. Figure 4 shows a Ghanaian traditional ruler fully dressed in Kente regalia.



Figure 4. Ghanaian traditional ruler dressed in Kente, [19]

4.3 Kente in the Global World

Studies have revealed that Kente was originally used by chiefs and royals in Ewe and Asante Kingdoms in Ghana. However, westernization and globalization have extended the use of Kente beyond Ghana and her people such that, it has become a trend among young people across African countries and also people in diaspora. Aboaye [17] noted that ever since Kwame Nkrumah wore Kente to the UN general meeting, Kente became globally recognized. Kente, since then was adopted by Africans in diaspora as a symbol of identity and cultural heritage and among the Afro-American. According to Asamoah [24], in the 1970s and 1980s, the black activist movements in the United States of America used Kente as a symbol of solidarity. Kente cloth was also used for pop culture among African celebrities such as Muhammed Ali and Jesse Jackson in the United States of America.

The symbolic use of Kente in the global world can also be seen in the use of Kente stoles for graduation in Western countries especially in the United States of America. It has become a custom for African-American students in colleges and universities in the United States of America to use Kente stoles during

their graduation ceremonies. Powell and Temple [27] noted that some colleges and universities in the United States of America have special days for Kente ceremony for African-American graduates. These universities and colleges present Kente stoles to black American students to honour them for their educational accomplishments. On this note, it serves as a symbol of unity which incorporate black students into the white-dominated universities [17]. Apart from this, it is also used regularly in some religious denominations such as the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in the West and Europe [24].

Over the years. Kente was majorly used by the elderly, however, in recent times there are different types of Kente that can be adopted for numerous fashionable styles suitable for both the young and elderly. Fashion designers and art entrepreneurs now produce artefacts and fashion accessories such as shoes, bags, ties, necklaces and stoles made with Kente. It is also used as wedding garments for Ghanaian brides and grooms [27]. There is however growing worries among many traditionalists on maintaining the sacred value and cultural significance of Kente among Ghanaians. However, Boateng [26] opined that Kente will continue to maintain its sacred value and significance regardless of its transformation, global acceptance and usage.

5. ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITIES ENHANCING THE CONSERVATION AND SUSTENANCE OF KENTE CRAFT IN GHANA

1. Kente Merchandising through Technology

Kente merchandising approach has evolved over time. Until recently, Bonwire Kente weaving village was the major Kente market where buyers buy directly from weavers. In time past, women within the weaving villages and neighbouring towns were the sellers and distributors of Kente. They peddled the cloth from one location to the other. These sellers are still relevant in the merchandising of Kente cloth across Ghana but they are not the sole distributors anymore. Instead of peddling, entrepreneurs now open Kente shops in Bonwire and across Ghana where customers can easily buy the Kente cloth and other Kente artefacts [17].

Civilization, globalization and the advent of digital technologies is revolutionising Kente marketing and merchandising. There are now online market platforms for Kente cloths and artifacts. Social media platforms like Whatsapp, Facebook, Snapchat, Viber, Freelancer and Instagram have all been used to enhance the merchandize of Kente. These technologies have help to enhance the merchandising of Kente across the world.

2. Kente Festival

Kente festival is one of the major ways of merchandising the product. This festival focuses on promoting the use of Kente among Ghanaians especially the people of Bonwire and Agotime. This festival was instituted by the chiefs of Bonwire and Agotime where the festival usually take place. This festival is celebrated once in two years in Agotime while in Bonwire it is celebrated once in four years [16]. In Agotime, Kente festival is called *Agbamevoza* and it is celebrated in July or August whiles weavers in Bonwire celebrate theirs either in October or November. As part of the activities for the celebration, Kente entrepreneurs and weavers exhibit and sell their Kente cloths and accessories made from Kente such as bags, stoles, ties and footwears among others.

The weavers, art entrepreneurs and the entire community also organize Kente promotion campaigns, football competitions, beauty pageant competitions and fundraising programs to promote Kente craft and support community development projects. The grand finale of the festival is usually on Sunday and this day is usually tagged 'Kente Day'. The Kente day is usually celebrated in most churches in the host weaving communities. Worshipers are usually cladded in beautiful and glamorous Kente garment. The festival is a major platform for art entrepreneurs to exhibit and sell their products [16]. Figure 5 shows a scene from the 2019 Agotime Kente festival.



Figure 5. Kente Festival, [28]

3. Kente Merchandising through Tourism

The development of tourism in Ghana has contributed greatly to the marketing and merchandising of Kente cloth, accessories and other Kente products in Ghana. Major Kente weaving centres such as the weaving centres in Bonwire and Agotime have overtime become tourist centres for foreigners that have interest in art especially Kente craft. These tourists learn about the history, significance, techniques and uses of Kente [17]. These tourists also buy Kente cloth and Kente products to use and sell in their home countries.

4. Use of Kente for Fashion Accessories

One of the most recent effort to preserve and maintain the relevance of the Kente cloth is by converting or adapting this fabric to other useful products especially fashion accessories such as shoes, bags, choir stoles and graduation stoles and stashes among others. Figure 6 shows the example adaptation of Kente designs for shoes. This helps to sustain the use of Kente products among the younger generation.



Figure 6. Kente Shoes, [29]

It is also common to see fraternities, church choirs and clergy using Kente stoles. Figure 7 shows examples of Kente stoles used by church choir and clergy men.



Figure 7. Religious Kente Stole, [30]

Kente Stoles are also used during college graduation by Black-American and African students. This serves as a source of pride and solidarity for the students and alumni alike. Figure 8 shows examples of Kente stoles used for graduation by African-American students and African students in Diaspora.



Figure 8. Kente Stole for College Graduation, [31]

These entrepreneurship activities have helped to sustain the local production of Kente and also the machine imitations. Sustained local production of Kente has encouraged young people to continue learning the craft because it remains lucrative. The significance of traditional crafts is communicated and passed down through oral traditions that have been passed down from predecessors [3]. These crafts are largely learnt through apprenticeship form of training.

6. CONCLUSION

The conservation of African craft, exemplified by the case study of Kente craft, showcases the potential of art entrepreneurship in preserving cultural heritage while driving economic growth and global recognition. The study reveals that unlike some African cloths, Kente remains relevant over the years both locally and internationally. It is the most noticeable textile craft in Ghana and in Africa at large. It serves as a means of solidarity among African students in Diaspora. The preservation and conservation of Kente craft in Ghana is crucial to the economy of the country because Kente is a major article of clothing used not only by indigenes but also foreigners and Africans in Diaspora.

Kente merchandising serves as a major source of income for a lot of Ghanaians that engage in art entrepreneurship. The craft has been promoted and preserved through different efforts by the government, indigenes and art entrepreneurs. Art entrepreneurship has breathed new life into Kente craft, propelling it beyond its traditional boundaries. By leveraging strategies such as: Kente festival, marketing through digital technology, tourism and diversifying the use and applications of Kente designs. Kente artisans have expanded the reach of their craft, establishing it as a symbol of African identity on a global stage. This has turned Kente weaving into not just a heritage practice, but a sustainable livelihood that empowers communities, preserves cultural identity, and fosters a sense of pride among those who engage with it.

The study revealed that the Kente craft's resilience is fortified by several dynamic factors. The annual Kente festival serves as a vibrant cultural celebration that not only showcases the craft's magnificence but also fosters community unity and reinforces its significance. The integration of marketing strategies through digital technology has propelled Kente cloth onto global platforms, widening its reach and engaging a diverse audience while ensuring its economic viability. The symbiotic relationship between Kente and tourism thrives, as travelers are drawn to experience the craft's creation, learn about its cultural nuances, and acquire authentic pieces, thus injecting vitality into both the local economy and the craft's preservation. Also, the craft's evolution through diversification, extending its applications from ceremonial wear to contemporary fashion and artistic expression, not only adapts it to modern trends but also maintains its relevance and allure, ensuring the continuous flourishing of the Kente craft.

The conservation of African craft through art entrepreneurship is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of human creativity. Kente craft, in particular, exemplifies the harmonious coexistence of heritage and progress, as well as the potential of cultural artifacts to transcend borders and bridge generations. The legacy of Kente weaving serves as an inspiration for other indigenous crafts and cultures, reaffirming the idea that entrepreneurship rooted in art and culture can be a driving force for social, economic, and cultural enrichment.

In a world where cultural diversity is increasingly valued, the conservation of African craft through art entrepreneurship is not just a means of sustaining the past; it's a celebration of cultural richness and a roadmap for the intersection of tradition and innovation. As the intricate patterns and vibrant colours of Kente cloth are admired, it is important to recognize that its conservation is an embodiment of the vibrant threads that connect Africans to a shared history, heritage, and the endless possibilities that the future holds.

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