Agbamevo:
Recognizing the Complexities of Kente in Modern Ghana
Through the Voice of the Ewe Kente Weaver

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Abstract

Often recognized globally for its distinctly “African” aesthetic, kente cloth is an important symbol of the national culture of Ghana as well as a representation of the localized communities that produce the woven textile. Within the larger conversation about African textiles, kente commands a significant amount of attention from art historians. These scholars note its excellent craft as well as the extensive cultural meanings communicated through color and pattern. This paper extends the conversation past the physical characteristics of kente and examines a community of Ewe weavers in Agotime Kpetoe, Ghana. By becoming a student of a kente cooperative in Kpetoe, I was able to witness its vibrant culture of teaching, creativity, and tradition. Ethnography and participant observation, supplemented by interviews with the weavers, reveals a perspective on kente and the occupation of weaving that has been underrepresented, within Ghana as well as the larger academic community.

The literature considers kente to be an art form of complexities, as shown by centuries of woven material communicating varying meanings and cultural nuances. This paper gives the same consideration of complexity to a community of Ewe weavers, recognizing that producers of kente are affected by social forces and do not necessarily maintain the same understanding and goals as their fellow weavers. The weavers’ perspectives on their occupation ranges from purely economic motivation, an interest in its creative opportunities, a desire to preserve cultural history, and an intrinsic connection to and love for kente.
Introduction

Kente cloth holds an important place in the culture of Ghana because of its unique physical structure and the many ways tradition and proverb are manifested within it. This cloth, referred to as ‘agbamevo’ in Ewe communities, is a creation of innovation, ranging from its pre-17th century patchwork beginnings to its evolving patterns in the 21st century. Around the globe a piece of kente woven in red, yellow, and green carries the essence of the “African” aesthetic with it. The international recognition of this particular aesthetic is due to the African Diaspora, symbolism in the African-American community, and the appropriation of patterns by the fashion industry. Despite kente’s visual familiarity, the name of the cloth, the regions it’s made in, or even the country from which it is sold remains largely unacknowledged by the general public. It is important that we bring the conversation about this iconic textile back to its origins, realizing the intricacies of the textile itself as well as the complexities of its place within local culture and Ghanaian society. A key factor in accomplishing this is the inclusion of the weavers themselves in the discussion, as they have been largely absent from any literature concerning kente. By including the personal experiences and cultural knowledge of the weavers, we begin to rewrite a previously Western-produced narrative that fails to take the complexities of Ghanaian society into consideration when evaluating kente as a cultural artifact.

The origin and development of kente is a contested history. The Asante and Ewe are two ethnic groups that currently reside, for the most part, within Ghana’s borders. The Ewe are spread across the Volta region in Eastern Ghana, bordering Togo. The Asante live in south central Ghana, with weaving business focused in the towns surrounding Kumasi. Both ethnic
groups lay claim to the original development of kente cloth, each with a unique story about how it came into existence. This history remains entangled with narratives of power imbalance between the two groups, in both politics and economics. Adler identified that “Ewe history, which we can only reconstruct from the records of outsiders, is scant. While the Ashanti ‘captured the limelight’ in the region, the Ewe were quietly settling in their villages, tucked away behind the impasse of the Volta River.” (41) As we learn the stories of the Ewe weavers, the history of kente is revealed to be much more complex than much of the literature presents. Despite the recognition of the craft of kente within academic circles, fairly little attention has been given to reexamining the written historical narrative about its origin established several decades ago.

The study of kente in the academic realm has been largely contained to the field of art history. This has resulted in crucial texts that survey the wide-range of textile production that takes place across West Africa. Strip weaving in particular has been documented extensively, as it varies from country to country. Much of this documentation has been based upon the extensive work of Venice and Alastair Lamb. The couple collected large amounts of West African textiles in the mid-20th century and detailed their research in publications such as *The Lamb Collection of West African Narrow Strip Weaving* (Lamb & Lamb) and *West African Weaving* (Lamb). Their work is noted as the first significant analysis of strip weaving (Wenzel). One particular weakness of works that followed a similar model of the Lamb’s, such as Gilfoy’s *Patterns of Life: West African Strip-weaving Traditions*, is that its survey, while extensive, fails to acknowledge many of the cultural details of each weaving group. Arguably, this generalizes many West African cultures and fails to recognize the role of the weavers in their craft.
In an important step forward in the study of kente, Malika Kraamer analyzed the progression of kente patterns and style of weaving in order to trace back its origins to one group or another in “Ghanaian Interweaving in the Nineteenth Century: A New Perspective on Ewe and Asante Textile History.” Additionally her work, “Weaving a Biblical Text: Ewe Cloth and Christianity,” recognized the importance of the Ewe weaver in the molding and changing of kente over time, something which had previously been ignored. While these works add a critical perspective to the field, the weavers have still been offered little opportunity to speak about their own experiences, experiences that offer the opportunity to view kente not just as an artifact of culture, but also as a tool through which culture is illustrated both figuratively and literally.

This thesis conveys the experiences of the Ewe weaver, including the story of kente’s origins, which is passed down from generation to generation. Recognizing the Ewe history of kente illuminates many other factors that continue to influence the textile, as we know it today. Economic security, business practices, public perception, globalization and political power are some of the influences outside of the physical act of weaving that affect weavers and subsequently the product they create.

The community of Ewe weavers I worked with resides in Agotime Kpetoe, Ghana. During the fall semester of 2014 I studied at the University of Ghana, Legon. My travels around Ghana led me to Kpetoe one weekend where, for the first time, I realized that there was a significant weaving community outside of the much-advertised Bonwire in the Kumasi area. Upon my return to the States at the end of 2014 and subsequent research I discovered that very little was written about this community of weavers I had visited. In December 2015 I returned to Ghana to spend fifteen days living in the nearby town of Ho and commuting daily to the village of Kpetoe, where I became a participant observer in a weaving center. The village has two different weaving
centers where local weavers gather to work. I spent most of my time at the older of the two, Dogbeda Kete Center, on the outskirts of town. I became a student of the kente cooperative in Kpetoe, witnessing its vibrant culture of teaching, creativity, and tradition.

The owner of the center, Philip Atsu Badu, was incredibly hospitable to me. His 27-year-old son, Promise Badu, was my key consultant and translator. The first week of research included learning the history, practicing setting up all parts of the weaving, and weaving my own strip of kente. I also spent some time walking around to visit weavers working outside their homes. The following week I began taking pictures of weavers and interviewing them. Ethnography and participant observation, supplemented by interviews with the weavers, reveal a perspective on kente and the occupation of weaving that has been underrepresented within Ghana as well as the larger academic community.

Each community of weavers has their own story to tell. Ethnography provides the opportunity to move conversation past the place the research has stalled at, one of cataloguing and comparing practices. Throughout the interviews Ewe weavers reveal frustrations with a system that limits their opportunities for improvement and access to power. This in turn limits the representation of Ewe weavers within the literature as they have effectively been silenced or drowned out by the Asante kente business. Assumptions are often made about the origins of kente, and generalizations are often made about what type of cloth is woven and why. These generalizations have not gone without critique (Aronson 149), but information specifically about Ewe weavers and their product is still not readily available. Thus there is a considerable need for the story of Ewe weavers to be told, for their history to be written, and for the role of the weaver to be recognized.
Strip weaving has many variants across West Africa. Kente falls under the category of narrow strip weaving, each strip measuring four to five inches wide and woven on a horizontal frame treadle loom (Figure 1). The length of each piece varies, depending on what that particular order will be used for. The warp\(^1\) is measured out so that the total strips can be woven end to end continuously. A small gap in the weft\(^2\) is allowed between each piece of kente so that the pieces can be cut apart and sewn together side by side. The loom has two heddles\(^3\) attached to ropes; one rope is held between the toes and pulled by the feet, the other is hooked on to a pedal pushed down with the heel. These two heddles allow for a double-weave and a single-weave to be implemented, often alternated in order to create more complex patterns. Multiple colors are used in both the warp and the weft to create depth and variety within the pattern. Each design requires

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1. Warp  
2. Heddle 1  
3. Heddle 2  
4. Compressor  
5. Treadle for Heddle 2  
6. Treadle for Heddle 1  
7. Weft  
8. Shuttles

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\(^1\) The warp is the set of lengthwise yarns that are held in tension on the loom.  
\(^2\) The weft is the thread that is drawn through the warp to create the cloth.  
\(^3\) The heddles are used to pull the warp open, alternatingly creating space for the weft.
unique combinations of heddle use and methods for passing the shuttle\textsuperscript{4} through the warp.

Complexity can be taken a step further by weaving symbols into the strips as well as lining the strips up to form larger patterns.

Currently, kente is woven with silk or rayon thread, offering a wide array of color options. Historically the cloth was woven with cotton thread, which was hand-dyed using natural elements such as berries or roots (Dennis 34). This produced a rather muted color in comparison to the bright hues offered by artificially dyed thread. Additionally the naturally dyed cotton lost its color and vibrancy over time. Cotton has been almost completely abandoned in favor of the rayon and silk threads, which the weavers also find sturdier (Promise Badu).

Once woven and sewn together, kente is used in a variety of ways. For men, it is commonly worn toga-style, wrapped around the body with the excess fabric thrown over one shoulder. Traditionally, women wrap the cloth around their body and tuck it into place to create either a skirt or a dress. While this is still commonplace for certain festivals and traditional events, many women now opt to have kente sewn into fashionable dress styles. For these, the kente is arranged into the requested pattern and sewn together by a seamstress that specializes in working with the textile. Mothers also use kente to tie their babies onto their backs. Throughout the years, the use of kente has diversified to include graduation sashes, clutch purses, earrings, etc. Kente can be worn and used in virtually any situation now, although it is typically saved for special occasions (Promise Badu). Up until a few decades ago, the use of kente was more particular, reserved for certain occasions that call for corresponding cloths, like births, baptisms, marriages, funerals, and royal ceremonies (Phillip Badu).

\textsuperscript{4} The shuttle holds the weft thread that is passed back and forth through the warp.
The Ewe Legacy of Innovation

Kente as we know it today is a product of many stages of innovation. The Ewe describe the evolution of cloth in their society as beginning with the use of animal skins and beaten tree bark as small coverings to be tied about the waist (Badu & Badu). Cotton cultivation introduced spun thread, which led to a more substantial, woven cloth. The weaving process started off with a standing warp, which was used to weave small individual pieces of cloth sewn together to create basic clothing. Eventually this standing loom was turned horizontal to allow for a longer warp, which is now recognized as strip weaving. The use of the heddles and the availability of dyed cotton thread introduced new complexities and patterns (Promise Badu).

Stages of innovation that led to the development of the current horizontal loom have also allowed for a wide variety of styles of weaving. Styles of kente, much like the fashion industry, have waves of popularity. Many exhibits in art or field museums display collections of vintage kente that exemplify a particular style of weaving identified as “traditional” (“African Art at the Art Institute of Chicago”). This traditional style encompasses a large variety of patterns that make use of woven symbols, blocks of color, and an emphasis on the multiple colors of the underlying warp. These are named with proverb-like phrases that teach a lesson or express the type of ceremonial event it should be worn to (Promise Badu). Patterns created and used heavily in the past few decades are often called “modern” or “innovative” patterns. These typically include heavily geometric patterns that often do not have a meaning or proverb tied to them. While the styles of weaving are often separated into two categories, interviews with Ewe weavers reveal a much more fluid concept of innovation, one that neither discards older patterns nor limits the extent to which a weaver can create new ones.
Several times I expressed my amazement that somebody could invent the complex loom system they continue to use today. The weavers’ response was to refer to this history of innovation that surrounds kente weaving. No one man invented the entire process at once. Rather, through many generations, the most effective methods of weaving were melded into what has become common practice. Each piece and its function are vital to the process. The fact that kente’s origins lie in simple patchwork weaving shows how its gradual improvement and innovation over time are an integral part of its identity, continuing into today’s kente production.

Fieldwork

An important part of my research was learning the kente weaving process myself. Any observer of kente weaving may look at a weaver at work and assume it’s not extremely difficult as they throw the shuttle back and forth through the warp with ease. As I experienced the process of weaving kente from start to finish, I began to understand the precision needed to set the warp up correctly, as well as the complexity required to weave. The process of setting everything up had to be extremely precise in order for the weaving to turn out correctly. This stage took much more math and constant recounting of threads than I expected. Throughout the setup process, as well as during weaving, threads occasionally broke, causing my teachers and me to pause what we were working on to rethread and attach the string.

The act of weaving itself was exhausting for me, as my body was not used to hours of sitting on a wooden stool, pulling down on the warp with my toes and throwing the shuttle back and forth between my hands. We spent three days setting everything up, and I spent three days at the loom weaving my own piece of kente. By the end of the third day, my legs and back were sore, and I was questioning if I had developed carpal tunnel in my hands. I had new respect for
the tedious hours weavers spent sitting at a loom each day. My training touched on a very small percentage of what the weavers are capable of. I progressed from a single-weave stripped pattern, to a double-weave stripped pattern and eventually to four small squares of geometric patterns. The last few patterns I worked on moved at a slow pace as I struggled to maintain awareness of all the aspects involved in the creation of a difficult design.

Weaving demands full body and mind involvement. Toes are curled around the rope, feet flexed to transition back and forth between the heddles. Legs move up and down pulling the heddles, and core muscles are engaged to keep the weaver sitting up straight on the wooden stool. Wrists and hands work constantly, counting out threads, passing the shuttle and pulling the compressor forcefully down to condense the weft. The weaver has to keep all these actions in mind, while also maintaining awareness of the desired thickness or length for each pattern, which sometimes requires counting out the weft for each color.

** Recognizing the Complexities of Kente

Although it may be perceived otherwise, the loom offers just as much room for creativity as a blank canvas. Textiles are easily misunderstood in conversations about art. We handle countless mass-manufactured textiles in our day-to-day life, leaving us disconnected from the potential of complex, original artistry in handmade textiles (Gilfoy 8). Many weavers in Kpetoe create their own patterns. Others reuse fellow weavers’ patterns but infuse them with their own style, using color and layout of the design. Overall, weavers have the opportunity to make their own unique mark on the production of kente. They are by no means constrained by the styles and patterns of the weavers that came before them.
To fully understand and appreciate kente we must move beyond a historic narrative of the product. The effects of 21st-century globalization on Ghana have created changes within the weaving community in Kpetoe and have also brought about significant challenges for the weavers. Some of these challenges plague the larger West African art market, such as inexpensive Chinese replications of their work or fluctuating tourism. Other challenges are more specific to kente weaving, such as the cost of silk or rayon, pricing of the work, and misunderstandings within Ghana about Ewe kente. Despite the challenges, the kente weaving tradition continues, adapting in ways that exhibit a trend of constant innovation within the community. Discussion of kente must include these recent changes, recognizing their importance in the tradition of weaving.

The transition from the stylistic qualities of the traditional patterns to the geometric modern ones is difficult to trace. Changes in national culture offer some insight. When Ghana declared independence in 1957, the role of textiles in Ghanaian culture took on new meaning as they were used in a government-led effort for “national culture.” In an effort to create an image of a young, yet united African nation on the international stage, President Kwame Nkrumah invested in particular forms of the arts as representation of Ghanaian culture. He chose Asante woven kente as his formal attire, wearing the traditional form of dress to government functions and international affairs (Hess 65).

Consequently the Asante style of weaving became iconic for not only Ghana but also West Africa (Ross & Adu-Agyem 37), even though its style stems from a single tribe. Kente as a symbol of Ghana coincided with the rise of Pan-Africanism as well as a desire from African-Americans to return to their roots (“Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian kente and African American Identity”). As these other movements used kente as a form of visual representation, Western
awareness of kente grew. Now it has led to the perception from foreigners that the bright colors and bold patterns of Asante kente is distinctly “African,” akin to tribal masks as an icon of African Art (Ross & Adu-Agyem 37). In consequence, traditional Ewe kente fell by the wayside as the brighter Asante kente took its place on the international stage. The Bonwire weaving village outside of Kumasi – where Asante weavers work – has become a famed location, a place any tourist is recommended to visit to see an important part of Ghanaian culture (Schimelman).

The transition of kente styles occurred because of several factors in the transformation of Ghana, from a land of autonomous tribes, to an English colony, to an independent republic. First, the European contact that prefaced colonization brought silk that led to the use of brighter thread in place of cotton. Previously cotton was used extensively in weaving as it could be grown, processed, and dyed in the area. Post-colonization led to a forced unification of many tribes into one nation; new lines were drawn to divide former colonies into countries. Once Ghana declared independence, it became necessary to create a national identity through culture to unite the diverse ethnic groups that spanned the nation. President Nkrumah’s use of Asante kente put that particular cultural artifact in front of an international audience. Eventually, that spurred changes to Ewe weaving through influences on the kente market due to globalization and tourism. This transition, however, is most simply characterized by the constant innovation that takes place in weaving communities in response to market demands.

Most of the work the weavers do is on an order-by-order basis, so the customer requests the pattern to be woven. Given the opportunity to weave outside of this arrangement, for the purpose of selling to tourists or kente salesmen, some weavers have expressed economic limitations. Essentially, the amount of time and money it takes to create certain complex designs leads weavers to choose other designs because they do not have the economic stability to take
such risks. In this way the process of weaving kente is beginning to model some of the same characteristics of Western capitalist societies, dropping intricacy and detail in place of a simpler product that will sell quickly.

In old photographs and certain pieces of antique kente found in museums and art galleries, patterns tend to be more complex in certain ways. One such complexity is in the use of symbols woven into the strips. These symbols are time-consuming to weave as the weaver attempts to create a more fluid shape in the very restrictive structure of the loom. Even some of the pieces that rely heavily on geometric shapes could be considered more complex, with thinner lines and a greater range of colors. The more colors used and the thinner the lines does not necessarily mean the design is more difficult for the weaver to make but simply more time-consuming, as they switch back and forth between shuttles multiple times for each line. Creating this level of detail is always the best business decision, as the time put into it does not necessarily equate to immediate payback. Complexity has not been altogether abandoned, however. The modern creations of a single-weave solid background with woven text running over the top is incredibly complex, as the warp is woven with the letters appearing backwards and upside down from the perspective of the weaver. Certainly this is not considered “traditional,” but it absolutely demonstrates the high level of visual thinking the weavers maintain in order to be able to problem solve spatially with each pattern.

The literature considers kente to be an art form of complexities, as shown by centuries of woven material communicating varying meanings and cultural nuances. I would like to give the same consideration of complexity to a community of Ewe weavers, recognizing that producers of

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kente are affected by social forces and do not necessarily maintain the same understanding and goals as their fellow weavers. The weavers’ perspectives on their occupation range from purely economic motivation, an interest in its creative opportunities, a desire to preserve cultural history, to an intrinsic connection with and love for kente.

The following sections reveal these varying perspectives one weaver at a time. Each weaver has unique experiences that also connect to larger themes within the community. I begin with Phillip Atsu Badu, owner of Dogbeda Kete Center. Then I will move on to Ebenezer Badu, who taught me how to weave. I will go on to focus on two female weavers, Abusah Ama and GbordziYawaa. Then I will continue with five other weavers in the community: Notsu Dominic, James Nutsukpui, Emmanuel Ganyaglo, Isaac Hallo, and Bright Narh. Finally, I will conclude with the perspective of Promise Badu, my key consultant, translator, and kente instructor.
The Dogbeda Kete Center has existed for over 35 years. Located on the outskirts of town along the main road that leads towards the Togo border, it sits directly across the street from a Ghana Customs training academy and is surrounded by a few small shops. It is a simple structure, cinderblock walls with a metal roof and dirt floors. There are no doors, so at night wooden benches flipped on their sides are placed in the doorway to block chickens or goats from
wandering inside. The structure is rather large with a total of eight looms that sit opposite from one another with the warps stretched out across the entire center of the room. Each loom has a different colored warp extending from the frame. Unfinished kente is covered with cloth to protect it from dust while the weavers are away from their work.

Various materials and tools sit around the workplace; a bucket or bag hangs from the side of each loom with the shuttles currently in use. There’s even a small cot along the wall behind the looms, which I observed Ebenezer using many times for a quick nap while I worked on some kente or left for lunch. The center is equipped with a radio and overhead lighting. The looms in the weaving center are also different than most. Many looms out in the community are simply made with found pieces of wood staked into the ground. The looms in the center are made to be more permanent, nailed together on top of a wooden pallet, weighted down with concrete blocks. These looms last much longer, usually several years before they need replacing.

All of these amenities make for a rather well established set-up for weaving. This is all due to the work of the owner of the center, Phillip Atsu Badu. Phillip originally created the center as a wooden structure with a thatch roof in 1979. Then he built the more substantial structure that exists today in 1994, complete with a sign along the road that reads “Dogbeda ‘Vɔmawu’ Kete Vocational Centre.” This large signage definitely marks the center as a clear destination for kente in comparison to the many people that work out of their homes. He wanted to build a center that would serve as place for tourists to come learn about the art and also a place to train youth in the art of weaving.

Phillip’s initiative in creating the center far outpaced the work of the government. Although kente is celebrated as an important element of national culture, the government did
not build a kente center in Kpetoe until around 10 years ago. Even then, the government-established kente center is simply a place for weavers to work. There is no cultural center or museum in Kpetoe. Weavers lack any permanent structure to keep their work preserved and on display. Kente is often displayed on clotheslines outside of homes or the center, but after a certain period of time the cloth starts to look worn from sun and dust, so most pieces are kept stored away. Phillip would like some sort of museum space that would allow them to display their work. This would also serve as a centralized space for the whole community to sell from, “so the business always comes here not anywhere else.” The idea of a designated space for kente was a reoccurring theme in many of my interviews. To many weavers this is a concept that offers a solution to the chronic lack of visitors, with hopes that a tourist center or museum would generate greater revenue with a new customer base. In many ways, Phillip has created this atmosphere with his center. What it lacks, however, is the funds for a space for preservation and display of traditional patterns

55-year-old Phillip has been weaving since the age of 10, becoming a master weaver at age 15. In the span of his lifetime he has seen weaving change quite a bit. His older brother taught him to weave as well as to recreate all the traditional patterns and know the meanings and stories that accompany them. During this time the traditional patterns with specific meanings were worn to the corresponding life event. As time went on, Phillip has seen this custom change in coordination with the addition of new patterns. Now it is acceptable to wear whatever pattern you please for special occasions. People still wear the colors used for the event, such as red and black for funerals, but the pattern isn’t necessarily linked to the occasion like it once was. This transition is assisted in part by the use of kente patterns without traditional meanings. These
patterns, often referred to as innovative patterns, did not exist when he began his work as a young boy. According to Phillip these newer patterns came about around 30 years ago.

Kente made with innovative patterns is not inherently different from traditional kente in the sense that it is made using many of the same techniques. “It’s built on the old ones,” Phillip said, referring to the years of gradual change that have taken place with the patterns. The patterns are different in their heavy use of shapes rather than traditional symbols, mimicking the style of weaving that comes out of the Kumasi area. Additionally, new thread made with artificial dyes allows a much brighter array of colors than the natural dyes used on the cotton threads. Use of new and brighter colors changes the appearance of the textiles dramatically. Replicated old designs take on new life with a change in colors. Over the course of Phillip’s lifetime Ewe weavers have transitioned to using imported silk or rayon threads for almost all their work.

A major concern with imported materials is the cost. Phillip, and many other weavers, expressed concerns about the price of materials: “Business is going quite well but the cost, the cost of materials is the problem.” The price of the final product doesn’t necessarily adjust for the fluctuation in the cost of materials, creating losses for the weaver rather than a higher price of kente in the market. Certain businesses may be able to take a risk on raising prices and waiting it out to make a sale. Weavers often do not have this luxury; their ability to feed their families and buy materials for the next piece they make often hinges on their ability to make a sale sooner rather than later. The longer they wait to sell, the longer they wait for payment for the many hours of work they have already put in.

Another issue Phillip noted in the recent business difficulties is the number of people weaving. Interestingly enough, he has seen a surge of interest in weaving in recent years. Previously there were not as many weavers in the village of Kpetoe, but now many people are
coming to Phillip with an interest in learning how to weave. It has always been an important occupation in the area, but it appears as if there is new interest in it for providing some economic stability. Of course, this influx of weavers has a downside, as orders for kente in the community are now spread among more weavers. Overall, the increase in weavers has led to less work for each individual.

Phillip is the head of his family and fulfills this responsibility in many ways. On multiple occasions he would leave for part of the day, tending to various family matters. These were often intertwined with business, embarking to the nearby town of Ho to deliver some orders and take care of some family matters at the same time. He’s also taught many people how to weave. When I asked how many, he laughed and responded, “Can’t keep count.” Both Ebenezer and Promise were taught how to weave by Phillip along with many others in the area. “It’s what I can do, so I want to teach other people how to weave as well.”

These responsibilities extend to his role as owner of the weaving center. In addition to establishing the center as a designated tourism spot, he also wanted a space to train youths in the community. Specifically, he wanted to assist orphans in the area by teaching them how to weave and providing them with a source of income. “When we have orders, we give them part of the orders and we pay them for the work as well.” Phillip’s role in passing on the skill of weaving is much different from other weavers. The immediate family serves as the automatic training ground for kente, and extending this teaching outside of the family structure breaks this mold. Learning the trade through family members is not required but rather happens by default, as it is often a family occupation that takes place in the vicinity of the home. The center is somewhat disconnected from the home-like atmosphere and acts much more like a formalized place of
business with a work environment, displays of kente for sale, and training people outside of the immediate family to weave kente.

Phillip himself is a rather quiet man who spoke even less when I was around because his English is very limited. He worked silently at his loom for much of the morning hours and late afternoon. Often times in the middle of the day, he would sit out in front of the weaving center on bench, silently watching the cars and motorbikes drive by on the road. Since this was also the hottest point of the day, I often sat outside with him to take a break from the stifling heat inside the weaving center. At first I was not sure if Phillip liked having me around, as we were unable to converse without the help of Promise. I realized I was nothing more than a temporary visitor to his world and was doubtful that he approved of my presence. But during my second day in Kpetoe he walked in to find me working right alongside Promise and Ebenezer setting up the warp. He chuckled to himself watching me work and then smiled and nodded in approval when I showed him my diagrams of the process I drew in my notebook.

While Phillip and I did not converse extensively outside of the formal interview, watching him run the center taught me a lot. A man of few words, he would often go about his work quietly, never making a big deal out of the things he had to do. On my last day in Kpetoe, he bought a large bunch of bananas and peanuts, and handed them to me, turning back to his loom with a shrug of his shoulders as I expressed my thanks. This thoughtful parting gift given in unceremonious fashion is a perfect example of Phillip’s character. He owed me nothing after so generously teaching me about their culture and how to weave. Similarly, Phillip carries no responsibility to build a centralized structure for the making and selling of kente or to teach orphans that he has no familial ties to, yet he does.
Phillip’s selfless approach to weaving stands out in contrast to many weavers who are primarily motivated to weave for economic reasons. Phillip has used the income weaving provides as a tool in helping orphans. The help he is giving them is undoubtedly something with long-term effects, a successful way to help someone on their way to become self-sufficient. Phillip’s insight into needing a museum space for the preservation and display of kente is key. Right now the weavers rely on the requests of customers to keep traditional patterns in use, which makes them vulnerable to being lost. Phillip has seen a lot change in his lifetime of weaving, making him an important source of knowledge and guidance in the weaving community.
On the day I arrived at the weaving center, 20-year-old Ebenezer Badu stood quietly alongside Promise and Phillip. He quickly brought in benches for us to sit on and brought water for us to drink from the shop next door. The next day when Ebenezer began helping with my training I was caught off guard, expecting that Promise would be the only one assisting me in my research. I had assumed that everyone would be hard at work in the center with little time for my
training. Instead there was a much more relaxed air about the work. Phillip spent a considerable amount of time weaving, but Ebenezer did not work at his loom the entire time I was in Kpetoe.

As Ebenezer and Promise helped me through my training, I began to love their two very different methods of instruction. Ebenezer knew only a small amount of English, which caused most of his instruction to take place through demonstration or guiding my fingers through the process. His verbal instruction took on a pattern, a quick succession of “no, no, no” as he shook his head whenever I began to do something wrong. This was followed by a “like this” as he either took the shuttle from my hand to do it himself or guided my hand through the correct strands of the warp. Once I had successfully corrected the mistake, he would give a long drawn out “yes” as he nodded his head and grinned with satisfaction. These moments of correction were common, although brief, and were always followed by laughter from both of us.

I am a perfectionist at heart and have spent considerable time working on various art projects that often culminate in some sort of frustration with the minute details. I never once encountered such frustration with learning how to weave. Ebenezer and Promise taught me with the utmost patience and lighthearted approach to the inevitable mistakes I made. Although I was only personally taught by those two, I got the sense that those who passed on the trade by teaching others did so with an air of patience that allows the practice of weaving to be one of great detail yet fairly low stress.

Venturing away from the center, we visited some young boys weaving outside their home. Three of them were working on the same order: individual strips of kente with a word woven across the strip with a number at the end. The youngest of the boys, most likely 13 years old, was struggling with one particular letter. Weaving letters into the strip is incredibly complex because from the position of the weaver it’s done upside down and backwards [right to left], with the final
product showing on the underside of the kente as it sits on the loom, reading left to right. When he vocalized his frustration, Ebenezer and Promise both leaned over his loom to help him figure it out. They pointed to what he needed to do and suggested different solutions but they were still unsuccessful. Eventually the boy sitting at the next loom leaned over to point out the way he did it. When this was successful, they gave a collective “ahh” and the young weaver continued his work.

This collective energy of assisting other weavers was demonstrated often; they would help without being asked. When kids grow up in this weaving community, they learn certain tasks like the spinning thread onto shuttles or weaving on the pegboard at a young age. These often become competitions between the children, seeing who can finish first. Interestingly enough, I did not see this competitive spirit displayed in any way between the adult weavers. They do, however, hold weaving competitions during their annual kente weaving festival.

Ebenezer was driven by creativity in his craft more so than other weavers. He expressed a definite interest in creating new patterns of his own. Weavers might replicate previous work a customer likes in different colors. Ebenezer prefers to “make things myself, that’s what I like to do.” His interest in creating something new and different has resulted in a wall of examples of his work, individual strips of kente hung from a clothes’ line in front of the weaving center. After an order is finished, excess warp is left behind and can be used to experiment on. Ebenezer uses these as a sort of blank canvas to carry out ideas for his patterns:
When I want to create something new, I know a lot of patterns in my head and the moves of how to go about it. So when I’m in the loom and want to create something new, I just get the shuttles and keep working on it and keep making my own moves, different moves, and it comes about.

He was very careful to point out that these new designs should be in addition to, not in place of, the traditional ones. While several weavers do experiment with their own patterns, it’s not standard that all do. There’s no taboo around using patterns other people have designed.

Patterns are often given names so that weavers can identify the design to replicate when a customer requests it. Older, traditional patterns have proverbial names that are reflected in the design of the cloth. Newer, geometric patterns are named after their appearance or after the person they are given to. For example, when Hillary and Bill Clinton visited Ghana they were given a gift of kente, made with a new pattern. This pattern is now known as “Clinton” and can be created by most weavers upon request. Some weavers name these new geometric patterns with proverbial titles. Ebenezer is opposed to this process, preferring to name the new patterns he creates by “how it looks.” He brought this up several times, always conceding that it would be wrong for geometric patterns to be given names with deeper meaning. Ebenezer’s careful navigation in creating the new but staying true to the ‘old’ expresses a respect for the roots of his occupation. His versatility in weaving new and old patterns helps him advocate for the continuation of both.

I witnessed experimentation with new ideas for weaving when Ebenezer and Promise decided they wanted to make a piece of kente to give to me as a parting gift. They wanted to weave one with words on it and asked if I had any suggestions. I decided to leave it up to them and see what they would come up with. Ebenezer created my piece of kente over the course of
two days. During this time I saw him working attentively and reaching a point of frustration, which led him to cut the section he was working on, off the warp. Later I realized he had been attempting to weave an American flag but replaced the 50 stars with one big star. The star was progressing well through the first couple of points but became imbalanced when he tried to mirror the points on the other side of the star. Even if it didn’t turn out perfectly I was impressed that he was able to carry it out as well as he did. The final product was a full-length piece of kente that read “Ghana Loves Abena6 Taylor” bookended by the Ghanaian flag on one end and the American flag on the other.

Ebenezer was also acutely aware of the business aspects of selling and making kente, perceptive about “what’s moving.” ‘Moving’ is the term used by the weavers to identify what is selling well, essentially what is popular with buyers. Most of Ebenezer’s work comes out of requests by customers that he has networked with. Occasionally, he will weave an entire set to sell to store owners. He also has a small collection of kente on hand to sell to tourists that stop by the center. In addition to this he has individual strips of kente displayed in front of the center. These types of sales require him to create something that has a good chance of being sold quickly as he acquires losses the longer he has to wait for reimbursement for cost of materials. He stays aware of what’s moving and weaves his pieces similar to what’s popular so that they might sell quickly.

Ebenezer also seemed to be the front man of the weaving center, almost always the one to work with any visitors that stopped by, both tourists and Ghanaians. On one occasion a tro-tro7 dropped off a female tourist who was interested in seeing the weaving process and possibly

6 My Akan name, given based on the day of the week one was born. Abena means “Tuesday born”
7 A tro-tro is a form of public transit in Ghana, typically a twelve-passenger van that drives routes from one village or town to another.
buying some kente. I watched as Ebenezer jumped up from his seat next to me at the loom and ran outside of the weaving center to show her around. While she looked around, a few other weavers in the area brought various pieces of kente to hang on the line outside of the center in hopes they might make a sale. It all happened so quickly I’m not sure how the rest of the weavers got word of a tourist so fast, but then again any visit from a white person in a village as small as Kpetoe draws a lot of attention. Ebenezer showed her the many types of kente to pick from, pulling the ones she liked from the line for her to hold. The woman ended up buying one strip of kente, a common practice for tourists as many do not know what to do with a full set of kente.

On another occasion a Ghanaian woman walked into the center and began talking to Ebenezer about an order of kente she wanted to place. In less than ten minutes Ebenezer talked the woman through all aspects of the kente she would purchase. He took her to the line of kente in front of the center, using previous designs as examples. She picked out a pattern and then they discussed colors, size, price point, and deadline. I did not observe him write any of this down, instead he verbally repeated it back to her. She left as quickly as she came and Ebenezer went back to working at the loom with the details of the new order tucked away in his mind.

The subject of Asante weaving always solicits a varied response from all the weavers. Ebenezer was the first person I interviewed formally, and thus he seemed a bit unsure how he was to answer questions about the Asante vs. Ewe kente controversy. He started off timidly, just saying that he didn’t know that much about Asante kente and that “there’s no difference, they are the same thing… The traditional ones are the ones with the difference.” As we discussed whether kente should be distinguished on a Ewe/Asante basis Ebenezer began to hesitate with his answers, looking to Promise and Phillip for help. With some reassurance, he gave me his own
opinion on the matter. He believes that the Ewe people invented kente, and he would like what they are weaving to be recognized as “Ewe kente.”

He expressed frustration that the Asante had garnered much of the attention around kente weaving: “I feel so sad for stuff like that… we need more trade than them.” Casual conversation about the Asante throughout the first several days in Kpetoe had led me to believe that the Ewe did not give much thought to the Asante vs. Ewe controversy often covered in scholarship on kente. As I conducted interviews, I found this assumption to be incorrect; they were hurt and frustrated by the virtual disregard for Ewe kente in Ghana and around the world, but this was often masked by a perceived indifference on the subject.

In many ways, Ebenezer fulfilled many characteristics I had presumed to find in the weavers of Kpetoe. He demonstrated a love for his craft and assisted younger weavers with genuine care about their success. He is creative and attentive to business, adept at working with customers. He strives to invent new designs while also recognizing the importance that the traditional patterns prevail in the coming years. Encountering this “ideal” representation of the traditional artist in modern times brought me to the realization that this archetype severely limits our understanding of these weavers. Ebenezer is vital to the continuation of Ewe weaving culture, but so are the many other weavers. A variety of perspectives and motives are important to acknowledge as kente weaving continues to evolve with the rest of Ghana.
My afternoons in Kpetoe often consisted of walks to various places in the village to visit weavers at work outside their homes. One of the first weavers I visited was 26-year-old Abusah Ama. Each visit took us from the weaving center located on the main road, down a footpath leading deeper into the village. Coming around a bend on the path lined by palm trees, I had my first glance at a woman weaver at work. My initial thought was how distinctly different women looked sitting at the loom compared to men. The men often weave shirtless, muscled backs...
shining with sweat bent over the loom, tense with concentration. Abusah Ama seemed to sit at the loom as if it were a throne, back tall and straight, sitting on the small wooden stool cushioned with a piece of foam. Abusah’s loom was set up in an opening near a cluster of homes. Two benches were set up under a tree near the loom with a couple of mothers watching their children play on the palm frond mat laid out at their feet. A couple of the older children giggled as I arrived and hovered nearby while I interviewed Abusah and took pictures.

Abusah Ama has a rather shy and soft-spoken nature, so it took her a while to warm up to my presence. She answered questions with a sheepish smile on her face, looking down at the kente she worked on as we spoke. Her weaving lacked the urgency I often saw as others worked, and instead carried an air of grace. Despite the relaxed nature of her work, she progressed quickly on the order she was working on during my several visits.

Unlike most of the other weavers I interviewed, Abusah did not grow up in Kpetoe. She grew up in Kpenyi, a small village just across the border in Togo. She lived there until she moved to Kpetoe in July 2015. Weaving was the primary occupation in the village of Kpenyi as well, and she found no difference between the weaving that takes place in both locations. Promise added, “All the youths there, the guys and girls, they weave because there is nothing there to do to survive or bring in money.” Although weaving appears to be a necessity in Kpenyi, it is not valued at the same level as government and office jobs. Weavers choose to leave their trade if offered the opportunity to take a different occupation.

Another characteristic that sets Abusah Ama apart from other weavers is how much later she learned the skill. She did not learn to weave until she was 20 years old. She attended school through junior high school but then got pregnant. After giving birth to her first child, her
brothers taught her how to weave so she could financially support herself. She has now been weaving for six years, has two children and a husband who works as a mason.

During my research, I encountered three women who weave, although I heard of a couple more. Needless to say, the number of male weavers far outnumbers the amount of women working at the loom. Traditionally, women were not allowed to weave. Recently, though, this tradition is no longer upheld and women are free to weave kente. Despite this general acceptance of women weavers, Abusah has experienced various resentments from male weavers. She pointed out that there were a greater number of women that weave in her last village, but they still faced ridicule from time to time. Recounting the irony of her situation, “back in the village…men that weave there say that this work is not for us [women].” She still receives some of those comments in Kpetoe. To my surprise, she attributed these kinds of comments to the younger male weavers rather than the older ones. The older master weavers appear not to protest the new role of the woman weaver. Listening to men in the community disparage those women working as weavers could easily discourage more women from taking up the work, gravitating to other occupations dominated by women.

Abusah pointed out two key elements that keep women from weaving: the comments made by men and the hard work involved. The act of weaving kente is physically exhausting, so she thinks some of the women don’t do it because “the hard work that’s involved.” This hard work may act as a deterrent since women are tasked with the responsibility of household duties that are also labor intensive such as taking care of the children, washing laundry, fetching water, and cooking the family’s meals. Abusah originally started out weaving at the Dogbeda Kete Center after her move to Kpetoe, but eventually moved her loom further back in the village. This
provided a safer space for her children to play away from the main road while she worked. Just like any working mother, she’s had to adapt her occupation to her caretaking role.

Abusah expressed discontent with her occupation, identifying “hairdresser” as her ideal job. That particular job would allow her to talk and hang out with her friends. The shops where they spend hours braiding hair are indeed prime opportunities for socializing. While she did express her desire for becoming a hairdresser, she never fully claimed to dislike weaving. Instead she remarked that if weaving paid well, she would continue working at the loom. Abusah’s responses align with many comments from other weavers in Kpetoe, generally focusing on income; after all, it is their occupation. But there was never an outright statement of lack of interest in weaving; rather, it was just a matter of another job being “better” or more desirable.

Abusah was working on a large men’s wrapper during my several visits. The men’s wrappers are sewn together with kente woven twice the length of a typical strip as well as a larger number of strips. Creating men’s wrappers takes more time, work, and supplies but it also fetches a much higher price. The color combination she was using was beautiful, pink, green, brown, cream, and a sort of dark gold. The pattern she was weaving had a high amount of detail considering the number of colors she was using, but the pattern itself was clearly a modern one with geometric shapes. When asked about the traditional patterns, Abusah Ama nonchalantly admitted that she did not know how to weave any. She was not taught the traditional patterns by her brothers when they trained her. She expressed no desire to learn how to weave the traditional patterns or know their meanings. She also showed little concern for passing on these patterns, relying on others to teach future generations.

Her knowledge of only modern patterns somewhat limits the scope of her production. Customers would not be able to request certain styles or patterns from her. However, her income
is not based solely on orders; she does a lot of work by creating a full set of kente to be sold in the little shops along the street in nearby villages. The men’s wrapper that she was currently working on was being made for that purpose. After I finished interviewing her, she asked me if I would like to buy it from her. I considered the offer as it was a beautifully woven piece, but the whole wrapper would not be finished before I would leave Ghana. She considered splitting the order up and selling me five pieces, but she eventually decided against it, as the full-sized men’s wrapper would fetch the highest selling price.

Perhaps the most revealing of her opinions of weaving came when Abusah spoke of her children’s future. Many weavers begin teaching younger siblings how to weave at a young age and later teach their own children. Abusah was adamant in her focus on schooling for her children. She gave a non-committal “yes” when asked about teaching her children how to weave. She said they were too young to learn yet but wanted them to stay in school. She hopes that they will eventually find jobs outside of weaving. Although Abusah never complains about her job as a weaver, she desires to become a hairdresser and focuses on education for her children. She does not have a passion for weaving, does not seek to find ways to innovate and expand her business. Rather, she is complacent with its place in her life as an occupation, weaving and selling product in order to have an income, without really engaging with its history or cultural tradition. Her place as an outsider, a woman weaver in a man’s world, is reflected in her atypical approach to weaving.
There is no question that women who weave in this area of Ghana receive some scrutiny from male weavers. Abusah Ama seemed to take these comments in stride, continuing her work with quiet resolve. Although her choice of work came out of economic necessity, she never spoke of an outright disdain for weaving. Rather, she often focused on other jobs she would like to have in place of weaving. Gbordzi Yawaa, a fellow female weaver in the area, held many of the same
beliefs about women at the loom as Abusah did. However, she expressed these in much more lively, candid fashion.

We found Gbordzi in front of her home sitting at her loom. She was not weaving, though, but instead was sitting on the stool at the loom while she twisted and tied her young daughter’s hair into a new style. She stood out in brilliant color amongst her sandy surroundings, dressed in a bright yellow top and a yellow and blue wrapper. She just so happened to match the blue warp stretched across her loom and the blue shutters of the house behind her. Amongst all these bright colors, Gbordzi herself stood out as well, with eyes that glimmered with, as I was soon to discover, a bit of humor.

Gbordzi’s story is similar to Abusah’s in many ways. She’s 20 years old and grew up in Kpenyi, Togo, attending school through 6th grade. Her brothers taught her how to weave at the age of 11 and she eventually began to work as a weaver on her own at age 15. Her aspirations were to learn a trade for her own income. She was particularly fond of the idea of being a hairdresser, but her economic needs led her to a career of weaving instead. She moved to Kpetoe in June 2015 with hopes that it would bring better business; so far she hasn’t seen the improvements in her income that she would have liked. Her work is entirely made up of innovative patterns. She never learned the traditional patterns and their meanings because her brothers did not know them either. Expressing no desire to learn the traditional patterns, she will continue to use the innovative ones for her work.

Within these weaving communities, it appears women are allowed to be weavers but not necessarily accepted. Gbordzi also received comments that “this work, the art or the weaving is not really for ladies.” She seemed to agree with these, informing me that she had no intentions of
teaching her daughter how to weave. By contrast, if she has a son someday, she plans to have her brothers teach him how to weave.

As the interview progressed, she became more honest with me, admitting that she agreed with the people that say, “It is not okay for ladies to weave.” I asked why she believed they were right and her brow furrowed as she considered this. “I can’t really say why women can’t weave. It’s just for men. Yeah, that’s how it is and I just can’t explain why.” I probed for clarification and she expressed the recent lack of business as a reason for why weaving was not a good occupation.

I asked if she would continue to weave if it provided better income, and she began to express another, completely unexpected grievance against weaving. She said something to Promise in Ewe, laughing, and Promise turned to me with hesitation in translating it. Finally, after I encouraged him to translate, he said, “Her ass hurts sometimes too.” At this I began to laugh and exclaimed, “Ha! I understand!,” for I too had been sitting on the wooden stool at the loom as I learned how to weave. I had quickly discovered that the work of weaving was not only exhausting for the arms, legs, and mind but also meant hours of uncomfortable sitting.

Encouraged by my laughter and appreciation for her comment, Gbordzi continued expressing her disdain for weaving because it made her “ass go down, like the size of it.” As we laughed over her blunt opinions on weaving, she made it clear that she doesn’t like weaving, “I’m weaving because I need money.” And so I thanked her for her candor because with it she had allowed me to see the many roles weavers embody in the community, with varied levels of commitment to the craft.
Life Around the Loom

Just a few yards from the weaving center, sitting right along the main road are three makeshift looms, set up in the shade of a palm frond hut. The warp from each loom stretches out towards a footpath that leads deeper into the village. The weavers work with their backs to the road. I visited this spot soon after I began my fieldwork at the weaving center, walking over to observe their work in the heat of the afternoon as they threw their shuttles back and forth in blurred speed.
19-year-old Notsu Dominic sat at one of these looms, working on an order with a pink warp, a hue that stuck out as bright even among the colorful surroundings. The village was shaded in lush vegetation of various hues of green. Even the sand-like dirt seems incredibly bright under the relentless African sun. Sitting near the weavers, on benches strategically placed in the shade, were several women. They sat and talked, occasionally getting up to sell various food and drinks to those passing by. Over my two weeks in the village, I observed women, men, and children gather here on a daily basis.

This place of social gathering became more formal later in the week when a funeral took place in the village. It is typical for funerals in Ghana to involve dancing among family, friends, and village members. For almost an entire day a large group gathered in an open space near the looms to drum and dance in celebration of the person’s life. Each loom’s warp had been rolled up and stored away. In its place, villagers sat on the weavers’ stools and leaned against the loom as they watched the festivities.

As a young weaver, Notsu Dominic is not always at his loom working. Most days he attends high school and weaves in the afternoon. The palm frond structure the loom sits under is equipped with a light, so when the village has electricity he is able to work on orders after sunset. On the day I interviewed Dominic, he said he had not attended school so that he could finish an order due to a customer soon. Although his weaving sometimes causes him to miss class, he has already surpassed the education level of many other weavers, most of which left school at the junior high level.

It is rather remarkable that Dominic has been able to maintain his status as both a student and weaver at his age. While young children may stay in school even as they learn to weave, they often leave school once they reach an age where they need the financial support of full time
weaving. Some weavers may stay in school with intentions of acquiring a new job and leaving their weaving occupation behind. Others worked hard to put their children all the way through school so they would have the opportunity to get jobs outside of weaving. While Dominic plans to complete his education, he has no intentions of leaving weaving behind.

Notsu Dominic was taught how to weave by his older brother and will most likely teach others how to weave over the course of his lifetime, including his younger siblings. Although he was taught both traditional and innovative designs, there are still many traditional patterns he does not know. There are also certain traditional patterns that he knows how to weave, but does not know the meanings of or stories behind them. The man that was supposed to teach him all these things passed away before Dominic could learn. He assured me that he has someone else to teach him, but this brings up a common concern with traditional art. There are often fears about the loss of cultural traditions as societies transition through periods of industrialization. Traditions maintained through oral histories are particularly vulnerable to loss, if new generations fail to learn it and pass it on. While this is a valid concern, it is clear that the Ewe people have a built-in system to pass these traditional ideas on to others.

Dominic’s reliance on the elder weaver to teach him the traditional patterns shows the importance of the older weavers in passing along patterns and traditions. Each generation seems to take this responsibility very seriously. Dominic recognized the importance of keeping the traditional patterns in use, even expressing a desire for more customers to request traditional patterns so they can come “into existence” again. This awareness of passing on patterns and continuing to weave them is what keeps their weaving heritage from being lost to the past. Dominic is a rather young weaver, yet he, like many others, recognizes his role in passing on Ewe kente.
In a clearing surrounded by small clusters of homes, I came upon James Nutsukpui weaving in a spacious opening in front of his house. The warp stretching out from his loom was rather lengthy and made up of alternating blue and white thread. He worked incredibly fast, using a single set of heddles and one shuttle of white thread. This style of weaving allows the warp to determine the pattern rather than the weft, creating stripes that run the length of the piece, rather than the width. This is a standard technique for certain varieties of traditional Ewe Kente.
kente. This style of kente is a little less heavy and doesn’t take as long to make. Because of these factors, it is more likely that this cloth is used for day-to-day wear, rather than being reserved for special occasions like most kente is.

36-year-old James Nutsukpui has been weaving and selling traditional kente since the age of 10. Born into a family of weavers, his grandfather began teaching him the patterns and their meanings at a young age. He has already passed along what he learned by teaching his younger brothers. He has continued weaving these traditional patterns since he began, never learning the current popular patterns. He has no issue with weavers developing new patterns and creating innovative pieces, but he has chosen not to do it himself.

James was the only weaver I encountered who did not weave any newer patterns. There are a couple of factors that have influenced James’s weaving the traditional patterns for over 26 years. The first is that he is able to weave them quickly. While some traditional patterns involve complex symbols inset into the cloth, the kente that James produces is often made with simple, stripped patterns. This type of cloth will not fetch as high of a price as other cloth, but it does allow for a lot quicker turnaround in weaving complete pieces ready for sale.

The second is that weaving the traditional patterns was what James grandfather and father did, and so the work was naturally passed along to him. He believes the traditional patterns are important “because this is what the forefathers started with.” James expressed, “it’s a very good and valuable thing to do and not let go.” In many ways he displayed an attitude similar to other weavers about the state of traditional Ewe patterns in the future. They recognized that there was a possibility that some patterns would be lost forever, but that they would always be passed on before that could happen. James, however, was one of the only ones working to ensure they were in use by constantly recreating them in his own work. “I don’t want this to be forgotten,” he
stated on multiple occasions. This was still a matter of business to him, but by selling these traditional cloths, he is keeping them as an active part of modern Ewe culture.

Weaving only traditional patterns creates a niche market for his craft. He weaves on order as well as kente to be sold to salesmen in the area. Most of his work will be sold to Ewe customers. This has provided him with a small yet steady market. “Yeah, people need it,” he explains, “especially the Ewe people, they need stuff like this more than others.” This does present some challenges for business, though. He gets little to no business from outsiders, “…the tourist does not come to buy from me. There is no demand.” Unlike other weavers, he doesn’t seem to seek out possible customers. He works further away from the road and weaving centers where people might stop to look for kente. He also does not display examples of his work, keeping just a few scraps of past orders in a plastic bag in his house. When business slows down he calls up clients that order from him regularly to ask if they need anything made. If they don’t need anything, he may ask if their friends are looking for some kente. This very personal form of networking exemplifies the specific market James caters to with his work. James’ role in the community of weavers is shown through his specialization in certain types of kente. Through weaving and selling these traditional patterns, he ensures that they continue to be circulated.
Preservation & Continuation

Before I met Emmanuel Ganyaglo, I knew him only as Promise referred to him, “the old man.” Upon entering the weaving center closer to town, I knew precisely why he was called the old man. Ghanaians seem to age exceptionally well, so it was somewhat rare to encounter someone who actually looked old. With his gray hair, clouded eyes, a smile missing some teeth, and a slightly bent back, Emmanuel was clearly the oldest of all the weavers I had encountered. However, I was still shocked to find out that he was actually 96 years old. At 96 years he sat there
bent over his loom in concentration, weaving one of the most complicated patterns. When Promise and other weavers spoke to him, he would meet their gaze with his clouded eyes, wide grin on his face. As I watched him work and converse, I was constantly amazed by his vitality.

Emmanuel began weaving at the age of 40, a different experience than most male weavers. He worked first as a nurse and then as a farmer and then began weaving, knowing it was something he could continue into old age, unlike farming. He reflected on weaving as his main source of income in the second half of his life: “It is my daily bread.” He uses this frame when explaining many aspects of his weaving, thus underlining the importance of weaving as an occupation and how its place as an occupation shapes the textile itself.

While Emmanuel knows how to weave both traditional and innovative patterns, he prefers to weave the traditional ones. When I visited, he was working on a traditional marriage cloth. This particular kente requires a method that uses a wooden paddle to separate the warp into three levels to allow for a periodically raised warp incorporated into the pattern. This method is considerably more difficult than the standard mode of weaving, making it a cloth woven only by master weavers. His ability to weave this cloth is even more impressive considering his age and most likely impaired eyesight.

Despite his love for the traditional, Emmanuel emphasized that because weaving is his source of income he must weave the innovative patterns at times “because of what’s moving now.” While all the weavers recognized that the patterns used in their work were largely controlled by the market demands, Emmanuel seemed to highlight this as a hindrance. This was accompanied by a fear that traditional patterns would become “forgotten patterns.” This fear was tied to the lack of demand in the kente market for traditional patterns, giving the weavers fewer
and fewer opportunities to weave them: “The art is an ancestry art. I believe it should be the old patterns and their meanings [that] should be maintained.”

Emmanuel echoed the frustrations of many other weavers when it came to Asante kente. “What they are saying, the Asante kente, I don’t understand that actually, because the artists are originally from here... and most of their traders send stuff from here to Asante region to sell.” He attributes their success to money and connections. “It’s always been like that. Because of us [Ewe] having not that link or that sponsorship to improve upon our work, and they [Asante] have such links and stuff like that so they establish the business well.” The Asante-dominated kente market continues to be a major issue for Ewe weavers as they struggle to develop their businesses. Emmanuel seems to look to outsiders for possible support, hoping that such funding could bolster their work.

Emmanuel was the first of the weavers interviewed to express an interest in a museum in order to preserve these patterns. He realized that the young people were interested in buying new designs instead of the traditional patterns, so it would be difficult to continue to have a market to sell older patterns to. But some sort of sponsorship that would allow them to weave outside of orders and market demands would create opportunities for the weavers to recreate collections of traditional textiles:

To start any work you need cash too. If there would be a way or if there would be a market for what we do here… They can come in contact with us…a real sponsorship deal and we would be ready to produce for them. People from America come here right now and tell us a lot of promises and stuff like that and we never get to hear from them. If there would be any opportunity for a museum or something to be built here for people to be coming here for certain things, that would be great.
In these comments Emmanuel expresses the same concerns about locality as many other weavers. There is a collective desire to see tourism and business take place within a local context, rather than seeing their product sent to other areas of Ghana to be sold.

Emmanuel represents the elder community well in many ways with a concern about the continuation of traditional patterns. He has more of a sense of urgency in the loss of these patterns than many of the younger weavers seem to perceive. His interest in a museum is possibly the most realistic model for preserving these patterns, a solution that does not rely on the ever-changing market. The kente Emmanuel was working on was one of many demonstrations of intricate and difficult weaving skills found in traditional cloths. These tedious creations deserve a place to be displayed and remembered even if they stop being sold.
Discovering Ewe Kente in the Midst of Asante Kente Fame

Isaac Hallo

Often weavers were reserved as I approached them, quietly continuing their work as Promise explained in Ewe why I was there. This was certainly not the case when I approached a group of brothers working at several looms set up in front of their house. It was a boisterous group of boys ranging from early teens to mid-twenties. The roof of the house was extended to shade the looms, a place filled with jokes and laughter. At one point an older brother leaned out a
window of the house to join in the banter. Isaac Hallo, one of the older brothers was the most vocal of the bunch, especially when I was around because he spoke fairly fluent English.

At the age of 22, Isaac weaves as his full-time occupation, after completing senior high school two years earlier. Isaac was taught the trade by his grandfather and was able to weave on his own by age 8. He has passed this on by teaching his younger brothers the trade. He was taught how to weave traditional patterns as well as new patterns. He completes orders for various customers as well as weaving pieces for sale in shops. All of these factors would lead one to believe Isaac fits a certain type of mold, one imagined to be the typical weaver. But Isaac is passionate and vocal about two big issues, the popularity of Asante kente and strengthening the Ewe kente business.

When the subject of Asante and Ewe kente was brought up, Isaac raised his voice, enthusiastic about pointing out the differences between the two. He briefly focused on the physical attributes of the kente, claiming you could tell a difference in the texture of the two. I told him that people outside of Ghana often did not know that Asante and Ewe kente were different, or that two kinds even existed. He responded, “They don’t know? Ah, but they need to know!” and then launched into the controversy of the origin of kente. He explained the war between the Ewe and Asante and that “they took some of our forefathers there [Asante lands] so that they could teach them [Asante] how to weave.” In order to back this claim he explains the origin story of the Asante, how a man discovered a spider spinning a web and captivated by its genius, models what becomes kente after it. “That one is a lie!” Isaac proclaims. “Yes, because when you compare the weaving of the spider to this weaving” – pausing to look back at the half-finished kente wrapped around his loom – “you can’t really.”
I had been in Kpetoe for a week by this point, yet this was the most candid response I had gotten from any of the weavers on the subject of Asante kente. I wondered what caused this hesitation to divulge their frustration, possibly an assumption that tourists and visitors would have no interest or simply not understand the issue. It was a reasonable reluctance when considering the many Ghanaians I encountered who overtly proclaimed the superiority of Asante kente over Ewe kente. Their basis for these claims? It’s just “better.” Not to mention the fact that Bonwire, an Asante weaving village, has earned a name for being a major tourist destination for international visitors interested in kente. Isaac offered some insight into the root of their frustrations, something that extends past just an argument about the origins of kente.

As we discussed the success of Asante kente, Isaac commented, “We don’t have money, that’s why they are saying kente is coming from Asante.” At first I didn’t catch on; I missed the point he was making until he finally said, “If we stopped right now and we not give them our kente again, it would be difficult for them.” Shocked at what he was saying, I had to ask clarifying questions just to be positive I heard him correctly. Sure enough, he explained to me that a lot of kente is woven in Kpetoe, only to be sold to shops in Kumasi. Once in the shop the weavers have no control over the piece, so their work is often misconstrued as Asante kente. “If you buy this kente at Kumasi, when they ask you where did you buy it, you tell the person Kumasi, but you don’t know the main place where the kente is coming from before that place. They are just buyers, they don’t know anything about kente.”

Isaac linked the success and popularity of Asante kente to the amount of money the Asante possess. He explained that, in comparison to the Ewe, Asante had more wealth, which allowed them to establish a strong hold on the business end of kente. It is hard to know which came first, the fame of Asante lands – and the subsequent tourism it gets – or the wealth of
Asante people. However, those two factors have created a market for kente dominated by the Asante. The Ewe have been left with fairly little publicity about their work and a business model with little room for growth in their already small margin of profit as they continue to sell to middlemen outside of Ewe territory.

Isaac’s sentiments about Asante kente are matched with a fiery passion to create an Ewe kente business of his own. Right now, he weaves kente on order and sells it to buyers just like most weavers in the area. However, he expressed a desire to do more than this, but currently lacks the resources to do so. His desire would be to act primarily as a salesman, paying his younger brothers directly for the kente they weave. He would also manage the materials, so essentially the younger brothers could be paid for their work, rather than each weaver individually figuring the cost of materials. He is unable to pursue this plan, however, because he doesn’t have the capital to deal with the initial overhead costs of materials.

In creating this type of business model in Kpetoe, Isaac would take back some of the business they lost to the Asante. He wants to establish a central store or building that people know they can always go to in order to buy quality kente. This would be especially advantageous – if properly publicized – to drawing in tourists. Tourism has declined sharply in the area, specifically in the last three years by Isaac’s observation. They used to get tourist groups who would call ahead for full tours that included a brief explanation of their cultural traditions and a demonstration of kente weaving. Now they are fortunate if one group comes a year. This is most likely, in large part, due to Ewe kente living in the shadow of the fame of the Asante Kingdom.

The only guidebook written solely on Ghana – as opposed to the whole of West Africa – references Asante kente and other attractions in Kumasi at length, while giving Ewe kente a small

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8 “Ghana: The Bradt Travel Guide” (Briggs & Wildman)
nod of recognition in comparison. The success of Ewe kente could be boosted by a centralized tourist attraction, but this would of course need to be accompanied by publicity to put it on par with the status of those in Kumasi.

Realistically, the success of Ewe tourism is up against much larger obstacles than simply establishing a physical destination. Ghanaians, particularly those in the Accra area, often describe the Ewe people with an air of prejudice. On several occasions Ghanaians from Accra commended me for my ‘bravery’ in venturing into the Volta Region, treating it as if it were the wild. Based on a couple of comments, this prejudice seems to come from a disdain or fear of their ethnic religious practices and rituals. This prejudice is rooted in the privileging of both Christianity and the city-dweller within Ghanaian society. This power dynamic adds to a collection of factors that obstruct Ewe weavers from making their village a destination for visitors of both national and international origins.

It is unlikely that Isaac will ever find the funds needed for his desired business under his current working situation. Between the cost of the materials and the time it takes to weave kente, the market price for the final product just simply is not enough to provide for new business ventures. But his aspirations are undoubtedly well placed, an effective way to bring business back to the immediate area. The current issues surrounding Ewe kente business are, in a way, a continuation of the controversy concerning the origins of kente. Ultimately this is rooted in conflict between the two ethnic groups centuries ago, which leaves room for bigger questions concerning the marginalization of the Ewe people.
Although I spent most of my time at Dogbeda Kete Center and the homes that surrounded it, I did visit the other kente weaving center in town on several occasions. The center was established by the government as a central space for weaving in the village. The building is much larger than Dogbeda, allowing considerably more sunlight to filter through, creating a brighter, breezier space. Several weavers were not present, their warps wound up and hanging
from their loom. One of the few weavers at work was Bright Narh. Bright is 34 years old, exuding a “time is money” attitude. The interview had to be negotiated by Promise as weavers at the center refused to be interviewed unless they were compensated. We finally settled on a small amount that would make up for the time he lost weaving. The interview reflected many of these businessman qualities, as Bright was acutely aware of what he gained and lost through the work of weaving.

Bright lives close by, but he chooses to work at the center instead of at a loom at home for two reasons. The first is the environment he is able to weave in. Referring to the many weavers that work alongside him he says, “We’re in competition so it helps me to work fast.” Working quickly is key in order to produce large amounts of kente to put up for sale. He also likes weaving at that location because it is a tourist destination. Theoretically this should help with sales, but Bright, like many other weavers, noted a downturn in tourism in recent years.

Bright is keenly aware of the potential risks a weaving occupation involves. Cost of materials has been on the rise in recent years, causing greater overhead costs for the weavers. Bright’s strategies to sustain his business match those of many other weavers. By taking note of “what’s moving” they can weave kente that fits the trend and therefore sells quicker. Another strategy he uses is producing old patterns with new colors. “When business is slow you have to push some strategy so this is the way you go about it.” He says. “They say, oh, ah look at this design I like and then you start to make it though it’s an old design. But the colors change then it becomes new for the customers so then you see the market will start moving.” This seems to be a key way of creating new kente. The kente he was weaving over the course of my time in Kpetoe was made of varying shades of blue in a thin-lined zigzagging pattern. The pattern itself was 17 years old, but the vibrant colors he was using were new and popular.
Bright may be strategic and wise with his business practices, but he does not hold any illusions about the difficulties of his occupation. If he had the money to do so, Bright said he would change his business, pursuing another occupation. “More you are getting old the more your speed of weaving will reduce.” When I asked if he was concerned about the craft of weaving continuing if people quit he replied, “The young ones will always continue. That is why I’m always interested in teaching the young ones how to do it.”

Other difficulties he faces seem to create some frustration for Bright. In selling kente, for example, he expressed the same sentiments as Isaac did about the Asante selling Ewe kente. “They claim they are doing the work but we are doing it. That is the problem here.” He thinks if they could grow the business in the Ewe region, they could stop this. “We are the producers of the hand fabric kente, we are the producers. So, as for the Asante, they are our sellers.” The Asante seem to be considerably more active in selling on a global scale. “As they are in the business they have all the links [connections]. Because they are business people and most of their relatives are outside [the country] so they have the link. So that’s how they do it.” This insight into the business world of kente holds some significant details that merit further investigation. If what Bright is saying is accurate, the diaspora of Asante in comparison to Ewe must be considered when examining the global kente market.

As for Bright, the Asante kente traders pose a frustrating hurdle to his quest for success in his own kente business. He recognizes that he needs more money in order to create a more profitable selling model but he currently lacks those resources. He seems perplexed by his inability to break into larger markets. Selling to tourists is even difficult as they often only buy one strip when they visit. But global markets offer the greatest opportunity for growth for these weavers and he wishes to expand into it:
I don’t know why your people are not buying a lot of our product. I don’t know, I don’t know. So are they scared of the material? I want them to buy more so that the industry will develop because most Africans or most Ghanaians they have [kente]. And I can see that maybe that is making the business collapse so if you can patronize, then I hope the business will grow more.

Bright is not the only weaver perplexed and frustrated by their struggle to improve business. He, like many other weavers, is extremely attentive to the pulse of the market. They know what is moving and they know how they could gain more business. However, they are stuck in a system that doesn’t allow them the resources to make the improvements they wish to.
Promise Badu’s role in this research has been invaluable. As a spokesperson for his people and a translator for my interviews, his perspective helped clarify many details about weaving in Kpetoe. Promise grew up in Kpetoe, surrounded by weaving since birth because of his father’s prominent status as a master weaver. A few years ago he came into contact with an employee for an American NGO that runs a school in Cape Three Points, a village on the western coast of
Ghana. They hired Promise to teach their students how to weave kente. This job keeps him in Cape Three Points for most of the year with periodic trips home to see family and weave an occasional order from customers. His experiences differ from the other weavers in his village because he does not depend on production of kente for his primary income.

Promise’s time away from Kpetoe has helped shape his perception of kente and how to express it to others. Almost all of the weavers were limited in their ability to communicate using English. Promise, on the other hand, spoke fluent English because he was living among Americans and Ghanaians who did not speak any Ewe. He was able to explain the history of kente and the process of weaving it in English with ease, as that is the same task he carries out as a teacher at the school. “I was the first person to teach the kids there how to weave this and they were really amazed to learn something like this. You know it’s quite cool.”

As he taught his students how to weave, he also learned more about the preconceived notions they held about kente. Some students saw the cloth as Asante, others knew it as Ewe. Many times kente would be referred to in conversation as “Asante kente” or “Ewe kente,” and so it was exposure to one category or another that informed the students’ perspective. Promise used this opportunity to teach the students not only about the textile, but also the Ewe history embodied by it. In doing this he mirrored the mentoring of young kente weavers that takes place in Ewe villages in a new setting, one that crosses regional boundaries.

Promise is still a very young weaver at 27 years old. Yet, he approached weaving with a quiet reverence, in a way that made him seem wise beyond his years. He reminded me a lot of his father in this way. Promise had an immense respect for Phillip as a father and as a master weaver; you could see it on his face as he spoke of his accomplishments. Promise grew up around his father working at the loom, beginning to assist with the menial tasks of weaving at the age of 5.
He learned how to weave as he grew up, able to assist with large orders Phillip received by the age of 10. Once Promise finished high school he began weaving full time. He often described his connection to weaving by saying, “I was born in this.” When attempting to explain the importance of weaving he draws upon the same metaphor, “I was born into it, I can see it has been in existence for a very long time so it’s important.”

Promise was very perceptive about how kente had changed and some of the forces behind this change. Change can be seen visually in the evolving of patterns over the years. Promise connected these changes in kente to the changes within Ghanaian culture. For a long time particular kente patterns were used for designated special events. Within Promise’s lifetime this has changed with Ghanaians ordering whichever kente they choose, whether it is traditionally tied to that event or not. It is at the intersection of practice and product that we can understand how patterns have morphed over the years. Promise observes how the changing of tradition affects the product they make: “Most of the traditions are really fading away so quickly. Most people are not interested in those traditional rites anymore except people that are deep into it, that really take those things seriously and use the specific cloth with the specific occasions.”

Promise accepts the evolving of kente over time, “in everything there is a change.” He embraces the new patterns weavers make but is also adamant about the preservation of their history through the old patterns. He sees the key to preservation and better business in the telling of their history. “There is no written history about it [kente] from here; that is what is crippling the business.” He proposes that if their history were written and widely circulated it would deter some of the ignorance or misunderstandings and spur on an interest in Ewe kente. He thinks that this would extend to a reemerging interest in the traditional patterns, once people understood the history behind them.
Dissemination of the Ewe history of kente weaving would also counter the ever-present narrative of Asante kente as the one true kente. The Ewe story, by contrast, details the capture of Ewe weavers by the Asante during a civil war centuries ago. The Asante forced the Ewe to teach them their practice. As Ewe weavers showed the Asante how to weave they explained in Ewe, repeating the words “ke”, which means open, and “te” which means press. This developed into the cloth being known among the Asante as “kete” which eventually became “kente.” Now that “kente” has become so well known around Ghana and the globe, the Ewe term of “agbamevo” for the cloth has become almost forgotten. This frustrates Promise and other weavers because the terminology traces the art to the Asante rather than the Ewe. “It’s that simple, it’s just one thing it’s not two. It’s just one thing called agbamevo not kente or whatever. Even if it should be called kente then it should be called kete.” Because of this history Promise characterizes the relationship between the Ewe and Asante as “a prisoner working for the master to have a name, to have the glory.” This representation shows the frustration of Ewe weavers over centuries.

Because of his job Promise is able to view kente from the perspective of outsiders. This has allowed him analyze kente in terms of an occupation and its place as a tradition to be passed on from generation to generation among other rites. While his occupation gives him some distance for such reflections, in many ways he is simply following in the steps of his father. Phillip expressed the importance of tradition and community by building a physical kente weaving center. Promise’s care for the traditions and community is expressed in a passion for the telling and dissemination of their shared history.
Conclusion

Art is inextricably informed by culture. Art, then, serves as a crucial medium for understanding the traditions and transitions of that culture. Kente is often presented as an important cultural artifact because of the symbols and proverbs embodied by the textile. Expanding the examination of a cultural artifact to include the ways it changes over time and those who have created it, allows us greater understanding of the culture as a whole. With this multidimensional approach, it becomes clear that as kente evolves, it reflects many outside factors. As entrepreneurs and artists, kente weavers have observed these changes in culture and acted upon them, making them wonderful sources of information about the evolving culture of Ghana.

Factors that effect Ewe weavers are of a cultural and economic nature. In fact the two are often intertwined, as the weavers production of kente is not purely cultural expression but also their sole form of income. The development of a national culture upon Ghana’s independence in 1957 – and the subsequent migration within the nation – is demonstrated in the innovations that take place within kente over time. As kente has evolved, it demonstrates the vitality in the craft, a practice that is responsive to the culture around it. These innovations are a product of the weaver and thus they play a vital role in the discussion of kente.

Centering the discussion of kente on the weavers recognizes their ability to take the pulse of local and national culture and reflect this in their work. This focus shifts research on kente from art history to anthropology in order to address the connection between kente and the communities of weavers that produce it. Literature on kente in the field of anthropology is rather
sparse, and those focusing solely on the Ewe weavers are even more rare. Through my fieldwork I sought to include Ewe weavers in the discussion about kente. However, many of the issues these weavers addressed require further research in the field of anthropology.

The controversy over the origin of kente is complex and more nuanced than previous literature has shown. Research on this has taken place predominately through analysis of the textiles, primarily through location and date. Ewe weavers lament that their kente is often sold in Asante lands as “Asante kente.” They also acknowledge the migration of Ewe weavers to work in the Kumasi area. Further investigation needs to take place considering these claims. If they are correct, it calls for a much more sophisticated system of provenance than simply categorizing kente based on the location where it was purchased. Rather, the true origin of any piece of kente can be determined only if the weaver who created it is identified.

The struggle of the Ewe weavers to expand their market is also possibly a consequence of the Asante’s power and wealth. Further research might address both the historical and modern power relations between the Ewe and the Asante. Although kente is “art,” it also holds a significant role in the economic aspect of many Ghanaian’s lives. Its place as an occupation in Ghanaian society cannot be divorced from various socio-political factors that affect its function. Politics in the form of ethnic histories, colonization, national government, and globalization are all bound to affect the lives of the Ewe weavers and thus their craft.

The function of this thesis was to reveal previously unaddressed areas of research on kente. The addition of ten Ewe narratives to the literature has substantial implications because it captures perspectives that have not been recognized or represented in the past. The experiences of Ewe weavers brought to light various issues that have potential for further research. Ewe weavers have endured layers of marginalization, from colonial to ethnic, and it is my hope that
As I stood in line at the airport to check in for my flight home from Ghana, I ran into an old friend from my time at the University of Ghana. “Thomas!” I exclaimed out of genuine surprise that I could run into a friend in a city as enormous as Accra. We spent the next few hours before he departed for Dakar catching up and talking about my research. When I told him that I had done my research on kente in Kpetoe he inquired why I had not gone to Bonwire. Though I had received this question many times over the past month, it had new validity coming from him. Thomas currently works as a teaching assistant in the math department at the University of Ghana; however, he comes from a family of weavers that work in Ahodwo, a village near Bonwire.

When I first began this research during the winter of 2015, I asked Thomas about his connections to Asante weavers and the possibility of working with his relatives to learn about kente. However, my focus shifted to Ewe kente after I noticed the disproportionate amount of information on Ewe kente in comparison to Asante kente. As I told Thomas about what the Ewe weavers had told me – their origin story, Ewe kente being sold in Kumasi, and migration of Ewe weavers to the Kumasi area – his smile faded slightly into a look of shock. He cocked his head to the side and gave a drawn out “What?” In the conversation that followed he told me briefly about the Asante weavers from his village and that the Asante were the original creators of kente. More than anything, though, he looked confused and caught off guard by what I had said, as it did not
mesh with his understanding of kente in Ghana. The conversation was cut short by a boarding announcement, we hugged goodbye and Thomas departed.

As he left I began to reflect on my research and the complexity of weaving communities in Ghana. It had seemed so simple when I began my research a year ago, the Asante and the Ewe have their own style and patterns to weave. Then, as I approached my fieldwork it all seemed muddied, as the patterns converged it became unclear how to separate the two styles of weaving. My fieldwork had begun to clarify everything as the Ewe weavers laid out their struggles and successes in our interviews. Surely, I thought, I’ve happened upon a certain element of the untold “truth.” But then as I sat with Thomas, descendent of Asante kente weavers, the issues became blurred again as I remembered that the Ewe kente narrative is intertwined with the Asante weavers.

Perhaps, the separation of Ewe and Asante weavers today does not lie in the kente’s style or pattern, but rather in the push-pull relationship between the two groups. Each group affects the other – at times in opposition, at others in agreement – linked by not only the physical production of kente, but also in playing a role in a dominate narrative. By looking at these individual roles, we see past a single narrative, into the lives of those who create kente, gaining greater understanding of how their individuality is interwoven with ethnic and national identity.

“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
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