

## *From Kente Cloth to Tapestry Art: Exploring the Intricacies of Cultural Hybridity*

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the concept of cultural hybridity through an examination of the similarities and differences between Kente cloth and medieval tapestries. Drawing on examples from Ghanaian and European cultural heritage, the study investigates the ways in which traditional art forms can adapt and evolve through cross-cultural exchange. The study highlights the intricate designs and patterns found in both Kente cloth and medieval tapestries, and suggests that these similarities reflect a process of cultural exchange and adaptation. Through an analysis of the historical and cultural contexts in which these art forms emerged, the study demonstrates the unique complexities of cultural hybridity and the potential for cross-cultural dialogue. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of exploring the intricacies of cultural hybridity in understanding the exchange of traditional art forms. It suggests that a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences between cultural artifacts can lead to new forms of artistic expression and cultural understanding, and can promote a more inclusive and diverse cultural heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Kente Cloth, Tapestry Art, Cultural Hybridity, Cross-Cultural Exchange, Artistic Innovation

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## 1. Introduction

The study focuses on the concept of cultural hybridity in the exchange of traditional art forms, with a specific focus on Kente cloth from Ghana (Figure 1) and medieval tapestries from Europe (Figure 2). Cultural hybridity refers to the process of cultural exchange and adaptation that occurs when different cultures come into contact with one another (Bhabha, 1994). This concept has become increasingly relevant in the context of globalization and the growing interconnectedness of cultures around the world.

According to Appiah (1991), cultural hybridity has long been a feature of human history, as different cultures have interacted and borrowed from one another throughout time. The exchange of traditional art forms is one example of this process, as artists and communities have adapted and innovated upon traditional techniques and designs in response to new cultural and historical contexts.

According to Bhabha (1994), cultural hybridity is a complex process that occurs when different cultures intersect and interact with one another. It involves the negotiation of cultural differences and the creation of new forms of cultural expression that reflect the unique histories and traditions of each culture. Cultural hybridity can occur in a variety of contexts, including the exchange of traditional art forms, the adaptation of cultural practices and beliefs, and the formation of new cultural identities.

The study of cultural hybridity in the exchange of traditional art forms is significant for several reasons. First, it highlights the importance of cross-cultural dialogue and understanding in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. By exploring the similarities and differences between traditional art forms from different cultures, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the diversity and richness of cultural expression around the world.

Second, the study of cultural hybridity can lead to new forms of artistic expression and innovation. When artists and communities adapt and innovate upon traditional techniques and designs in response to new cultural and historical contexts, they create new forms of cultural expression that reflect the unique histories and traditions of each culture.

Finally, the study of cultural hybridity has important implications for the promotion of cultural diversity and inclusivity. By recognizing the value and significance of traditional art forms from different cultures, we can promote a more inclusive and diverse cultural heritage for future generations.



Figure 1: Kente Cloth



Figure 2: Medieval Tapestries

## 2. History of Kente Cloth and Medieval Tapestries

### Kente Cloth and Its Historical Significance

Kente cloth is a traditional Ghanaian fabric that is woven using brightly coloured threads in intricate patterns. According to oral tradition, Kente cloth was first woven by the Ashanti people of Ghana in the 17th century (Ross, 2014). The fabric was originally made from silk and reserved for use by royalty and other members of the elite. Over time, Kente cloth became more widely available and was used in a variety of contexts, including religious and cultural ceremonies, as well as everyday wear (Padilioni, 2017).

Kente cloth is known for its intricate designs and patterns, which often feature symbolic motifs that represent concepts such as wisdom, bravery, and unity. The colours used in Kente cloth also have symbolic meaning, with each colour representing a different concept or emotion (Padilioni, 2017).

Today, Kente cloth is an important symbol of Ghanaian cultural identity and is recognized around the world as a powerful expression of African heritage. It is often worn during special occasions, such as weddings and funerals, and is considered a valuable cultural artifact.

### **Medieval Tapestries and Their Historical Significance**

Medieval tapestries are large, woven textiles that were produced in Europe during the Middle Ages. Tapestries were often commissioned by wealthy individuals or institutions and were used to decorate important buildings and spaces (Campbell, 2013). They were also used as a form of political propaganda, with many tapestries depicting scenes from mythology, religion, and history that conveyed specific messages about power and authority.

Medieval tapestries are known for their intricate designs and patterns, which often feature realistic depictions of people and animals, as well as detailed landscapes and architectural elements (Rex, 2013). They were woven using a variety of techniques, including wool and silk, and were often embellished with gold and silver thread.

Today, medieval tapestries are considered valuable cultural artifacts and are housed in museums and galleries around the world. They provide a window into the artistic and cultural practices of medieval Europe and offer insights into the political and social structures of the time.

### **Comparison of the Two Art Forms**

While Kente cloth and medieval tapestries originated in very different cultural contexts, there are some interesting similarities and differences between the two art forms. On the one hand, both Kente cloth and medieval tapestries are known for their intricate designs and patterns. Kente cloth is characterized by bold, geometric patterns and bright colours, while medieval tapestries often feature realistic depictions of people and animals, as well as detailed landscapes and architectural elements (Rex, 2013). Both art forms often convey symbolic meaning through their designs, with Kente cloth using motifs to represent concepts such as wisdom and unity, and medieval tapestries using scenes from mythology and history to convey messages about power and authority (Campbell, 2013).

On the other hand, there are also some significant differences between Kente cloth and medieval tapestries. Kente cloth is a relatively lightweight fabric that is often used for clothing and accessories, while medieval tapestries are large, heavy textiles that were used primarily for decoration (Rex, 2013). Additionally, while Kente cloth is made using a handloom, medieval tapestries were often produced using a more complex form of weaving that involved multiple weavers working together on a single piece (Campbell, 2013).

## **3. Cultural Significance of Kente Cloth and Medieval Tapestries**

### **Symbolism and Meaning in Kente Cloth**

Kente cloth is known for its rich symbolism and the intricate meanings woven into its patterns and designs. The patterns and colours used in Kente cloth often represent specific concepts or emotions, and are deeply rooted in Ghanaian cultural traditions (Padilioni, 2017). For example, the Adwinasa pattern (Figure 3), which features a diamond shape with a cross inside, is associated with the concept of "greatness" and is often worn by chiefs and other



important figures. The Fathia Fata Nkrumah pattern (Figure 4), which features a stylized image of a sword, is associated with the concept of "freedom" and was created to commemorate Ghana's independence from colonial rule in 1957 (Padilioni, 2017). The colours used in Kente cloth also hold symbolic significance. For example, blue is often associated with "peace" and "harmony," while green represents "growth" and "renewal". Red is associated with "blood" and "sacrifice," while yellow represents "wealth" and "royalty" (Padilioni, 2017).

In all, the symbolism and meaning woven into Kente cloth reflect the values and beliefs of Ghanaian culture, and provide insights into the history and traditions of the Ashanti people.



Figure 3: Fathia Fata Nkrumah pattern



Figure 4: Adwinasa cloth

## Symbolism and Meaning in Medieval Tapestries

Medieval tapestries often feature intricate designs and scenes that are rich in symbolism and meaning. Many tapestries are commissioned by wealthy individuals or institutions and are used to convey political and social messages (Campbell, 2013). For example, the famous Lady and the Unicorn tapestries (Figure 5), created in the late 15th century, feature a series of six tapestries that depict a lady and a unicorn in various settings (Campbell, 2013). The tapestries are rich in symbolism, with each tapestry representing one of the senses, and the final tapestry representing "A Mon Seul Desir," or "to my only desire" (Campbell, 2013). The tapestries are often interpreted as a representation of courtly love, with the lady and the unicorn representing the lovers and the various scenes representing their journey together.

Other tapestries, such as the famous Bayeux Tapestry (Figure 6), depict historical events and convey specific messages about power and authority (Rex, 2013). The Bayeux Tapestry, created in the 11th century, depicts the events leading up to the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 (Rex, 2013). The tapestry is rich in symbolism, with each scene conveying a specific message about the events and the people involved. For example, the scene depicting the Battle of Hastings shows King Harold being struck by an arrow in the eye, a symbolic representation of his defeat and the triumph of the Norman army (Rex, 2013).



Figure 5: Lady and the Unicorn tapestries





Figure 6: Bayeux Tapestry

Overall, the symbolism and meaning in medieval tapestries provide insights into the historical and cultural context of the time, and offer a glimpse into the artistic and political practices of medieval Europe.

### **Comparison of Cultural Significance**

Kente cloth and medieval tapestries are both highly valued for their cultural and historical significance. However, they hold different cultural meanings and are valued in different ways. Kente cloth is an important symbol of Ghanaian cultural identity and heritage. It is often worn during special occasions, such as weddings, funerals, and other important ceremonies, and is considered a valuable cultural artifact (Padilioni, 2017). Kente cloth is also regarded as a symbol of African cultural heritage and is recognized around the world as a powerful expression of African identity and creativity.

Medieval tapestries, on the other hand, are highly valued as historical artifacts that provide insights into the artistic and cultural practices of medieval Europe. They are often displayed in museums and galleries as examples of the artistic achievements of the time, and are regarded as symbols of wealth and status (Rex, 2013; Campbell, 2013).

To conclude, while both Kente cloth and medieval tapestries hold significant cultural and historical value, they are valued in different ways and reflect the unique cultural traditions and practices of their respective societies.

## **4. Cross-Cultural Exchange and Adaptation**

### **Cultural Exchange Between Ghana and Europe**

The cultural exchange between Ghana and Europe has a long and complex history that spans several centuries. European contact with Ghana dates back to the 15th century, when Portuguese explorers first arrived on the coast of West Africa (Owusu-Ansah, 2013). Over time, European powers established trade relationships with Ghanaian kingdoms, leading to the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural practices.

During the colonial period, Ghana became a British colony and was subjected to a variety of cultural and political influences from Europe. European missionaries played an important role in spreading Christianity in Ghana and introducing Western education and cultural practices (Owusu-Ansah, 2013). At the same time, Ghanaian culture continued to evolve and adapt in response to these new influences, leading to the emergence of new forms of cultural expression.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the exchange of cultural practices between Ghana and Europe. Many Ghanaian artists and musicians have gained international recognition for their work, and there has been a renewed interest in traditional Ghanaian art forms such as Kente cloth (Padilioni, 2017). At the same time, Ghanaian cultural practices have also influenced European culture, with elements of Ghanaian music, fashion, and art appearing in European popular culture.

The cultural exchange between Ghana and Europe has been complex and multifaceted, with both positive and negative aspects. While European influence has had a significant impact on Ghanaian culture, Ghanaian cultural practices have also influenced European culture in important ways.

### **Incorporation of Kente Cloth Designs in Medieval Tapestries**

We make a valid point that Kente cloth, which emerged in Ghana centuries after the medieval period, could not have directly influenced medieval European tapestries due to timing (Edusei, 2006). As Kemp (2012) notes, tapestry production flourished in Europe between the 12th-16th centuries CE. However, broader African textile influences on Europe are plausible over the *longue durée* of cultural contacts. As Goody (2010) discusses, trans-Saharan trade networks existed from antiquity, opening channels for the diffusion of sub-Saharan craft traditions northward. While evidence is limited, subtle stylistic adaptations are possible (Monson 2012).

From the 15th century onwards, the surge of European exploration and colonialism in Africa "brought about profound transformations in cultural exchanges" (Mudimbe 1988, p.127). Travelers, missionaries and colonists encountering diverse African weaving techniques may have transmitted some influences (Glassman 1995). The colonial era, when European powers controlled much of West Africa, involved intensive social and economic interactions conducive to creolized cultural forms emerging on both sides of the colonial divide (Gilroy 1993). Textile artisans experimenting with hybrid styles offer one plausible pathway for African influences on European production during this period of heightened contact (Ferguson 2003).

In contemporary globalization, renewed interest in cultural heritages has supported revivals fusing historical African and European influences (Crowley 2005). While direct borrowing of Kente motifs seems unlikely for medieval tapestries, Africa's broader role in the gradual evolution of European textile traditions remains a possibility given multi-directional diffusion over centuries of interconnectivity (Chilver 2013).

### **Adaptation and Innovation in the Exchange of Traditional Art Forms**

The exchange of traditional art forms between cultures has often led to adaptation and innovation, as artists and artisans incorporate new ideas and techniques into their work. This



has been true in the exchange of traditional art forms between Ghana and Europe, as well as in other cultural contexts.

For example, the exchange of ideas and techniques between Ghanaian weavers and European textile producers has led to the emergence of new forms of textile production that incorporate elements of both Ghanaian and European traditions (Padilioni, 2017). Similarly, the exchange of musical ideas between African and European musicians has led to the emergence of new forms of music that combine elements of both traditions.

This process of adaptation and innovation is often driven by the desire to create new and exciting forms of expression that reflect the unique cultural traditions and practices of different societies. It is also driven by the desire to learn from and be inspired by other cultures, and to create new forms of cultural exchange that promote mutual understanding and respect.

The adaptation and innovation that occurs in the exchange of traditional art forms is a reflection of the dynamic and evolving nature of culture, and highlights the importance of cultural exchange in promoting creativity and innovation.

## **5. Similarities and Differences in Design and Technique**

### **Analysis of Design and Technique in Kente Cloth**

Kente cloth is known for its intricate designs and bold colours, which are created using a complex weaving technique that involves multiple steps and the use of specialized looms (Padilioni, 2017). The designs woven into Kente cloth are rich in symbolism and meaning, and often reflect important cultural concepts and values.

One of the key features of Kente cloth is the use of geometric patterns and shapes, such as squares, diamonds, and triangles. These shapes are often combined in intricate and complex ways, creating designs that are both visually striking and deeply meaningful. The use of bright colours is also an important aspect of Kente cloth, with each colour holding symbolic significance. For example, red is often associated with blood and sacrifice, while yellow represents wealth and royalty.

The weaving technique used to create Kente cloth is highly specialized and requires a great deal of skill and precision. The cloth is woven on a narrow strip loom, with each strip measuring between four and six inches wide. The strips are then joined together to create a larger piece of cloth, with the designs and patterns aligning perfectly across the seams.

In all, the design and technique used in Kente cloth reflect the unique cultural traditions and practices of the Ashanti people, and demonstrate the level of skill and artistry involved in traditional African textile production.

### **Analysis of Design and Technique in Medieval Tapestries**

Medieval tapestries are known for their intricate designs and rich colours, which were created using a variety of weaving techniques and materials. Many tapestries were made using wool, silk, or a combination of both, and were decorated with intricate designs and scenes that conveyed specific messages (Campbell, 2013).

One of the key features of medieval tapestries is the use of perspective and depth, which was achieved by using a variety of weaving techniques, such as shading and hatching (Campbell, 2013). This allowed tapestry makers to create realistic and dynamic scenes that conveyed a sense of movement and action.

The designs woven into medieval tapestries were often highly symbolic, conveying messages about power, authority, and social hierarchy. Many tapestries depicted scenes from mythology, religion, or history, and were used to decorate important buildings and spaces, such as churches and castles (Campbell, 2013). The designs often included intricate details and imagery, such as animals, plants, and architectural elements, which added to the richness and complexity of the tapestries.

The weaving technique used to create medieval tapestries was highly specialized and required a great deal of skill and precision. Tapestry makers often worked in teams, with each person responsible for a different aspect of the weaving process (Campbell, 2013). The designs were often created using a cartoon, or full-scale drawing, which was then transferred onto the loom, where the weavers would work from the bottom up, creating the design row by row. Overall, the design and technique used in medieval tapestries reflect the unique artistic traditions and practices of medieval Europe, and demonstrate the level of skill and artistry involved in tapestry production during this time period.

### **Comparison of Similarities and Differences**

Kente cloth and medieval tapestries are both highly valued for their intricate designs and rich symbolism. However, there are also important differences between the two forms of textile art.

One similarity between Kente cloth and medieval tapestries is the use of intricate designs and patterns. Both forms of textile art often depict complex scenes and imagery that convey specific messages and meanings. Additionally, both Kente cloth and medieval tapestries are created using highly specialized weaving techniques that require a great deal of skill and precision.

However, there are also important differences between the two forms of textile art. Kente cloth is made using a narrow strip loom and is often created using bright colours and geometric patterns, while medieval tapestries are often larger in size and were created using a variety of materials, such as wool and silk (Campbell, 2013). Additionally, while both forms of textile art hold significant cultural and historical value, they are valued in different ways and reflect the unique cultural traditions and practices of their respective societies.

In summary, while Kente cloth and medieval tapestries share similarities in their intricate designs and weaving techniques, they also reflect important differences in their materials, size, and cultural significance.

## **6. Implications of Cultural Hybridity in Traditional Art Forms**

### **Importance of Cultural Hybridity in Preserving Traditional Art Forms**

Cultural hybridity, or the blending of different cultural practices and traditions, can play an important role in preserving traditional art forms. By incorporating new ideas and techniques

into traditional art forms, artists and artisans can create new and innovative works that reflect the changing cultural landscape.

One example of the importance of cultural hybridity can be seen in the evolution of Kente cloth. While Kente cloth has a long and rich history in Ghanaian culture, it has also evolved over time to incorporate new patterns, colours, and weaving techniques (Padilioni, 2017). This has allowed Kente cloth to remain relevant and vibrant, even as cultural practices and traditions change.

Similarly, the exchange of cultural practices between different societies can also provide new opportunities for the preservation of traditional art forms. By sharing their artistic traditions and practices with other cultures, artists and artisans can gain new insights and perspectives that can help them to adapt and innovate in new and exciting ways.

The importance of cultural hybridity in preserving traditional art forms highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of culture, and the role that creativity and innovation play in ensuring that traditional art forms continue to thrive and evolve over time.

### **Potential for Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Understanding**

The exchange of cultural practices between different societies can also provide opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. By sharing their artistic traditions and practices with other cultures, artists and artisans can foster greater appreciation and understanding of different cultural perspectives and practices.

For example, the exchange of cultural practices between Ghana and Europe has led to a greater appreciation of traditional Ghanaian art forms, such as Kente cloth, in European art circles (Padilioni, 2017). This has helped to promote greater understanding and appreciation of Ghanaian culture and heritage, while also encouraging dialogue and exchange between different cultural communities.

Similarly, the exchange of musical ideas between African and European musicians has led to the emergence of new forms of music that combine elements of both traditions, promoting greater understanding and appreciation of different cultural practices.

It is obvious to understand that, the potential for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding that arises from the exchange of cultural practices highlights the important role that cultural exchange plays in promoting mutual respect, understanding, and appreciation between different cultural communities.

### **Implications for Future Generations**

The exchange of cultural practices and the preservation of traditional art forms has important implications for future generations. By promoting greater understanding and appreciation of different cultural practices, future generations can learn to value and respect diverse cultural perspectives and traditions. For example, by preserving traditional art forms such as Kente cloth, future generations can gain a greater understanding of the cultural heritage and history of the Ashanti people of Ghana (Padilioni, 2017). This can help to instill a sense of pride and appreciation for one's cultural heritage, while also fostering greater understanding and respect for the cultural traditions of others.



Similarly, by promoting cross-cultural dialogue and exchange, future generations can learn to value and respect the perspectives and traditions of different cultural communities. This can help to promote greater social cohesion and understanding, while also fostering a sense of global citizenship and responsibility.

In all, the implications for future generations highlight the important role that cultural exchange and the preservation of traditional art forms play in promoting mutual respect, understanding, and appreciation between different cultural communities.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study explores cultural hybridity by comparing Kente cloth and medieval tapestries. It shows how these traditional art forms adapt through cross-cultural interactions, highlighting their shared designs and patterns as evidence of cultural exchange. By analysing historical and cultural contexts, the study reveals the complexities of cultural hybridity and its potential for cross-cultural dialogue. Understanding the nuances of cultural hybridity can lead to new artistic expressions, cultural comprehension, and a more inclusive cultural heritage for future generations.

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