

An Appraisal of the Aesthetic Dimension to the African Philosophy of Cloth

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Abstract

In the African society, the art and life of the people symbiotically reflect each other. African art has its own history, its aesthetic concept, as well as a powerful emotional content. This is the case for the African philosophy of Cloth. Cloth in this context has metaphorical import which helps to define concepts of the people and their culture, social relationships, beliefs and their understanding of human existence. In other words, Africans enter into reciprocal, reflexive relationship with their cloth metaphor, through which they gain more insightful understanding both of themselves and of their conception of cloth. This no doubt is beyond the surface beauty of the African cloth. The African cloth has an inherent aesthetics in its symbolic usage, motifs, colours, and even in the message cloth “speaks”.

Key Words: Culture, Cloth Metaphor, Aesthetic Symbolism.

Introduction

Just like most African visual art forms, the African conception of cloth is created not just to please the eyes. The African cloth has its underlying symbolism which actually takes its root in the peoples’ values and belief system. In the African belief, cloth goes beyond mere covering of the body, to prevent exposure. There is this inherent aesthetics in its symbolic usage, motifs and colours, and the messages, cloth “speaks”. It is in this context that Borgatti (1983) affirms that cloth use and cloth metaphors help to define concepts of humanity and culture, proper social relations and behaviour. In other words, cloth could have metaphorical imports. In the typical Nigerian culture, because of the importance cloth connotes, nakedness is used to denote different types of insanity. Among the Akan people of Ghana, the kente is more than just a cloth. It is a visual representation of the people’s history, oral tradition, ethical beliefs, social value and political philosophy. In essence, cloth in this context is a wordless means of communication that is well understood by those who use it. It is in this same context that the Anyi of Côte d’Ivoire have proverbs integrated in cloth.

There is no gainsaying that the Africans place great cultural value on cloth. In the African metaphorical analogy of the cloth, there is the visual and symbolic references to their cultural heritage. Indeed Africans are lovers of fabric. While some cloths are adorned for their simple beauty, others are held portent for the intrinsic aesthetics in its symbolic and metaphoric import.

The Metaphoric import in the African conception of cloth.

The functions of art vary, depending to a large extent on the socio-cultural context. It is in recognition of this, that Danto (1981) expresses the metaphoric function of art. In his explanation, art functions as metaphor, so as to elicit the relationship between the viewer and the artist and the art piece. This is also against the background that metaphor as a figurative expression could be employed in other to elicit a deeper understanding of the meaning of experiences. In this same regard Feinstein (1982) has affirmed that through a paradoxical process which condenses and expands meaning, metaphor enables us to generate vivid associations, and develop insightful deeper and more personal understanding.

Specifically, the focus in this paper is the African conception of cloth. The intent here is to identify the underlying aesthetics in the visual and symbolic referents or attributes of cloth in the African culture. Essentially, an attempt is made to articulate and bring to fore, the metaphoric import in the African fabric, in its motifs, colours and usage. For instance, the patterns and colours of the Ghanaian kente cloth, reminds the Ghanaian of the values in his ethnicity, pride as a Ghanaian, and his African heritage. Significantly, cloth as metaphor in Africa generates deep insights and personal understanding while, in the same vein, it unravels some untold stories, and captures unspoken words. It is more of a situation where Africans enter into reciprocal, reflexive relationships with their cloth (metaphor). Through this, they gain an in-depth understanding of themselves and of their concept of cloth.

The foregoing further articulates the function of metaphor as a “communication device”. One that allows coherent “chunks” of perceptual, cognitive, emotional and experiential characteristics to be transferred from the known to the less well-known (Ortory, 1975). This view can be expressed using the “Kanga” wrap cloth from the East African Coast. According to Beck (2005), the “Kanga” cloth has proverbial texts printed on it. The topics of these proverbial texts usually centre on love, conflict and exhortative sayings. In essence the kanga cloth is used to communicate. Specifically, it is used either when a woman wears it for others to see, or when it is given to a woman as a gift on special customary occasions or festivals (marriage, end of mourning, birth of a child, religious festivals or as a farewell gift). In the opinion of Beck (2005) whichever way it is used, it is understood in the East African culture to communicate.

The kanga cloth is mainly used as a wrap for women. It is a gendered cloth, for the special reserve of the female gender. In this culture, kanga is said to have its connection with the identity of the wearer (women), through its relation to the body. The traditional kanga cloth is a rectangular wrap. It has images and proverbs printed on it. The proverbs are used to silently communicate messages between family members and outsiders. In this case too, it can also be said that the body serves as a tool, through which messages are disseminated. Where the woman is unable to read the proverbs, the images suggest the meaning and message. However, with modernity, the Western styles have infiltrated the traditional kanga cloth. The new kanga does not carry the typical Swahili proverbs that send messages. Thus, the modern kanga cloth may not be said to hold same cultural significance, as the traditional one.

Still on the metaphorical import in African cloth, the Anyi people of Eastern Cote d’Ivoire, employ proverb names for cloth. Even before the advent of printed factory cloth, this group of people have always identified their traditional hand-woven cloth with proverbs or ‘ajendera’. In a research carried out by Domowitz (1992) on Proverb Cloth among the Anyi people, findings revealed that even with contemporary printed factory cloth, these Akan sub-group still use proverbs names. The whole idea, like it is with the Kanga cloth, is to send

messages. Such messages on the cloth come with designs, and at times imprinted, proverb text. Domowitz (1992) gave example of a funeral cloth that has the imprinted proverb, “Owu se fie” (death ruins the family). At the same time, the cloth has the design of a family portrait, surrounded with skull motifs.

The Anyi cloth also has unspoken messages (proverbs not imprinted), but with visual designs. Importantly, such visual design communication can only be deciphered and understood by the people. This is in the sense that they have a reciprocal relationship with this cloth metaphor. In other words, the messages in the anyi cloth cannot be universally apparent. Understanding of such messages comes with a certain level of competence in the culture, and an awareness of the local events of that particular cultural milieu. Domowitz cited some examples of the anyi cloth. There were cases where names of cloth are derived from anyi traditional proverbs. At other times, there are complex associations, where the names given to the cloth relate to the design as a symbol or metaphor for something else. All of these stem from the cultural values of the Anyi people. This further explains how cloth serves the purpose of identification and communication. In the assertion of Domowitz, (1992) “communicating by means of proverb cloth are like billboards, whose messages are repeated and reinforced, for as long as the cloths are seen and decoded”.

Also important in communication via proverb cloth, is the underlying ethics in these messages. For instance there is the anyi cloth with Spider motif. The cloth is named “Spider”. Its pattern stems from a local proverb which says “what one does to a ‘cenda’ (a small harmless spider), one does not do to ‘bokohulu’ (a large spider considered dangerous)”. The ethical message here is that a new wife should not be maltreated like the former. Such a message is actually intended for men who change women as a habit. Cole and Ross (1977) have noted that cloths are oftentimes purchased because of the proverb names they carry, not so much for the design. Like in most African culture, the Anyi proverb cloth forms a significant aspect of Anyi oral traditional.

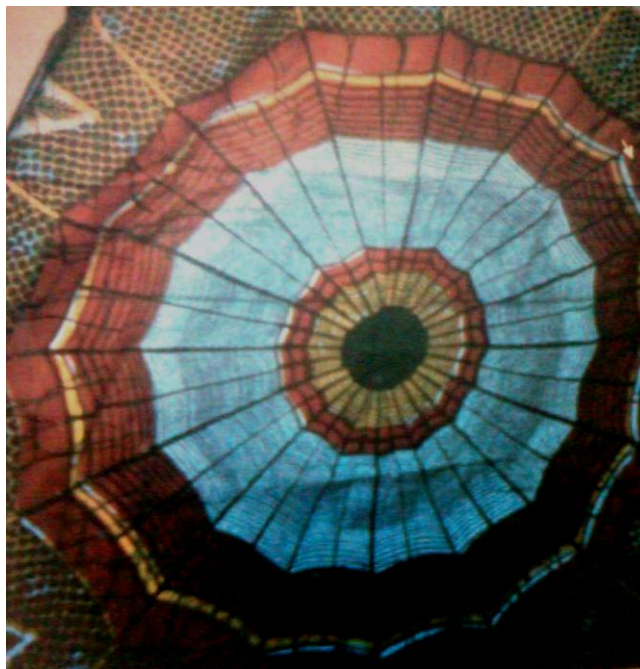


Fig 1. "Spider." This pattern recalls the Anyi proverb that advises, "What one does

to the small, harmless spider, one does not do to the large, dangerous one."

Traditionally, the Ghanaian kente has always had its designs or weaving pattern expressed in proverbs. The "Adweneasa" pattern was exclusively for kings and made popular in the 17th century. "Adweneasa" in Akan language means, "my skill is exhausted" or "my ideas have come to an end". This proverbial pattern expresses metaphorically, the zenith in craftsmanship for a weaver. In the Akan culture, such pattern declared the weaver a master of his art, which is indeed a prestigious status. If the kente pattern is "Aberewa Ben" then it took its root from the wise saying that, "a wise old man symbolized wisdom and maturity". Another notable kente proverbial pattern is the "pepe" meaning, "the balance of the weights of judgements knows no shame". In all of these, the proverbial patterns of the kente cloth have implication for the person of the weaver, as well as his status. It is on record that the largest known kente cloth (measuring 12 feet by 12 feet) is "Tikne Noko Adjina" meaning "one head cannot go into council". The cloth was presented to the United Nations by a former Ghanaian President, Kwame Nkrumah. The symbolism in a cloth of this nature is a reflection of its proverbial name and meaning.

Still in the Akan culture, the Adinkra is another cloth that serves as a communicative tool. This may not be farfetched from the fact that "nkra" in Akan language means message. The Ashante people link such messages to the soul, with its source from the gods. Generally, all adinkra cloth carry symbols and motifs that communicate symbolic significance. Oftentimes, the message in the adinkra is a reflection of what the motifs represent or mean in the Akan culture. The adinkra cloth was originally used as a cloth to wrap around one when mourning.

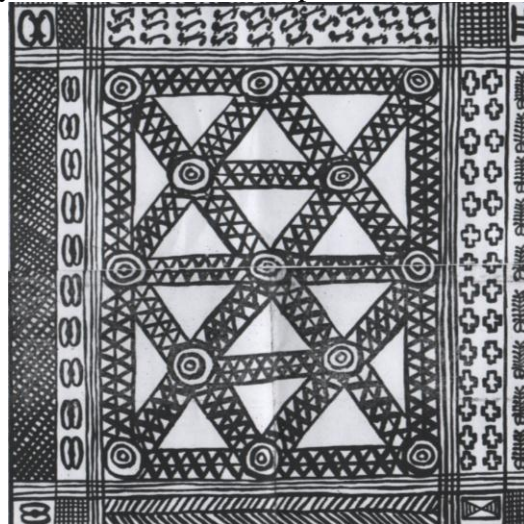


Fig. 2. An assortment of Adinkra motifs

But now it has other uses, especially when the backgrounds are colourful. Typical among the adinkra cloth is one with the motif, "Akokonan tia na ennkum ba". This is reflective of the Ghanaian saying that "the hen does not tread upon its chickens". Such design is symbolic of the king as royal, yet with familial protection for his subjects. There is also the adinkra motif, "Nkonsonkonson" meaning link or chain. This is derived from the Akan wise saying that man is linked in both life and death. An expression that says that those who share common blood relations never break apart. This is quite symbolic of human relationships among the Ghanaians.

Importantly, the Africans place value on cloth not only for its texture and quality. African conception of cloth is one with its own history, its own aesthetic content as well as powerful emotional content. Indeed, the African fabric like their other art forms is a way of living. It renders the invisible, visible.

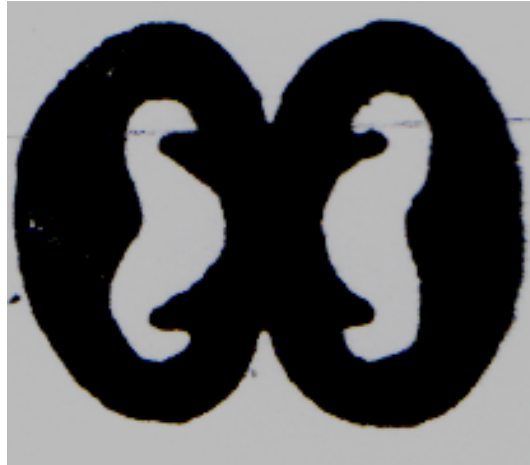


Fig. 3. Adinkra Motif Nkonsonkonson (Link or Chain)



Fig. 4. A design of the Kente cloth typical of the Royals.

Aesthetic Peculiarities in the African cloth motifs, colours and symbolic usage

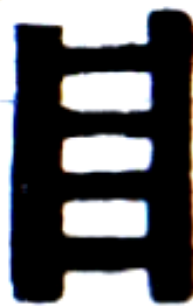
Oftentimes, the Africans express their world in symbols. These symbols for Dzobo (2001) serve as sources of insights into the African orientations to life. Specifically too, the African philosophy of cloth is replete with symbols. It communicates the thoughts, beliefs and values of the people. In other words, symbols are used to communicate complex knowledge, thus bringing to bear, the rich cultural African traditions.

Essentially, in cloth motifs and designs, the Africans express their sentiments. Patterns and motifs are peculiar to different cultures. Such motifs identify with leadership, status, sex and carry particular names. It is this symbolism in its association with the cloth that makes motifs in the African cloth philosophy, quite significant.

The kente cloth of the African culture is a cloth of royalty and prestige, reserved for special occasion. Like most African visual art form, the kente cloth is a visual representation of the Akan culture, history and social values. A historical account tells us that kente derived its name the Ashanti word, “kenten” meaning basket. This allusion of the kente to the basket actually stems from its design. It features an array of patterns and geometric shapes and design. Traditionally, the kente cloth has its origin in the weaving traditions of the Akan culture. The legend behind this says that the first weavers of this cloth learned the art by observing a spider weaving its web. This mythical perspective to the cloth also links the kente cloth industry to the symbolic Ananse, the wisdom spider, also known as ‘nature’s weaver’.

Motifs and pattern in the kente cloth have names and meanings which are peculiar to the Akan culture. Sometimes these names are given by weavers, who claim to get them through inspirations, dreams and in their communion with the Spiritual realm. At other times, the names of motifs are given on the basis of the design arrangement of the warp and weft of the cloth. Specifically, motifs in the kente cloth of Akan culture are mostly geometric, while the Ewe kente cloth woven by Ewe people of the eastern border of Ghana are figurative symbols. Notably though, all kente cloth irrespective of the origin, all have names for the motifs. Such names and their meanings come from the moral values of the people, oral tradition, philosophical concepts, proverbs, individual achievement, attributes of humans etc. In essence, the kente cloth and the life of the people symbolically reflect each other.

Still on the aesthetic symbolism in the patterns and motifs of the African cloth, the Adinkra cloth comes to mind. As previously highlighted, the adinkra cloth is of the Ghanaian culture. ‘Adinkra’ is a Twi word which literally means, “to say goodbye”. Dzobo (2001) has identified the adinkra symbol as one of the six major groups of symbols in the Ghanaian culture. In the explanation of Dzobo (2001), the adinkra symbol like all other Akan symbols convey the way of life of the Ghanaian people. Most times, the adinkra is used as a traditional mourning cloth. When this is the case, the motif indicates so. For instance, there is the motif named “owu atwedee” and done artistically, yet symbolically means, “the ladder of death, everybody climb some day to go to God”. This original (adinkra) mourning cloth has its symbolic meaning printed as motif on the cloth. This makes the weaver carry a clothing poster that transmitted a message.



*Fig. 5. Adinkra motif “owu atwedee”.
The ladder of death.*

There is no gainsaying that in the African philosophy of cloth, the motifs and design are oftentimes appreciable, and in its peculiar symbolic communicative usage, another axiological dimension is added.

The Ikakibite cloth is especially reserved for royals, and for use as a ritual cloth. This cloth is peculiar with the Ijo people of present Rivers and Bayelsa States of Nigeria. The

Ikakibite cloth serves as the royal robe of the Ijo kings or the Amanyabo, and a special cloth used by women during the coming of age ceremony (iria). In the Ijo language, “Ikakibite” literally means “the cloth of the tortoise”. This is an indication of the weft patterns resembling that of the tortoise shell. Aronson (1980) has pointed out that even though the Ijos refer to this cloth as the Ikakibite, the cloth actually originated from the Ijebus, who referred to the cloth as ‘aso olana’ or ‘the cloth with design’. Significantly, the cloth’s association with the tortoise emanated from the Ijo culture. According to Ercher and Erekosima (1981), the Ijos taking in the “aso olana” cloth, renaming it and transforming it to suit their own culture is more of “cultural authentication”. Anderson and Peek (2002) have also noted that the Ijos associate the tortoise motif with the Ikakibite cloth, which stems from the mythical trickster ‘Ikaki’ (tortoise) of the Ijo culture. The symbolism of tortoise motif also takes its root in the Ijo traditional proverb, ‘Kiri ikakiri’ which says that the Ikaki or the tortoise knows everything. Another way of saying the tortoise represents wisdom, in the same way the Ashante people of Ghana revere Ananse, the Spider, as ‘nature’s weaver’.



Fig. 6. An example of Ikakibite cloth

The Ikaki or tortoise image is one symbol that cannot be ignored in the historical and social context of the Ijo people. Historical accounts have it that even in times past when the British Imperialist tried to generate a strife and rivalry amongst the Ijos, they were quick to remind themselves of their bond as one, using the ikaki symbol. In essence, the ikaki symbol served as a mark of identification and re-unification. In another vein, Aronson (2002) noted that the tortoise image and its perceived spiritual powers has greatly influenced the philosophy of life of the Ijos. It is in this regard that they attach much value to the Ikakibite cloth. Till date, the tortoise image is a symbolic force to reckon with in the socio-political life of the Ijo people. This makes the Ikakibite cloth, not just any cloth, the motif in the Ikakibite is symbolic in meaning and lineage. Most highly placed and cherished traditional cloth in the Ijo culture bears the Ikaki motif. This singular symbol gives the cloth an official status.

It is this same importance accorded the Ikakibite cloth that gives its usage special preserve. For instance, women wear the cloth at the ‘iria’ or the coming of age ceremony. The implication in the usage of the cloth for this ceremony, in the Ijo culture is quite symbolic. When the women use this cloth, on such a status-achieving ritual, they are actually being appropriated male status symbol. In the same vein, when the Ijo Priest or ‘Pere’ uses the Ikakibite either worn or spread on the ground for divination, it is said that the cloth has a certain spirit or “oru” that

invokes potency, (Horton, 1962). Amongst the Nembe Ijo priest, it is common place to find them with the “Ikagbara” or shoulder cloth which also bears the tortoise motif. When they do this they are said to be empowered at divinations. Since the 18th century, the Ikakibite cloth has remained a major part of the king’s (Amanyabo) regalia. What is implied here is that like the tortoise or Ikaki knows everything, so does the Amanyabo.

The Ikakibite as a status cloth makes its usage quite significant. As cited in Aronson (2002) the cloth is so important that in the Abbi House of Buguma, all members that have the right to wear the Ikakibite (the Abbi variety) must firstly perform the “Egbelebege Owu” masquerade. The Abbi variety of the Ikakibite cloth is historically associated with this masquerade. Also in 1984, the Buguma centenary celebrations, the commemorative statue honouring Abbi Amakri, was totally enshrouded with the abbi Ikakibite cloth. This no doubt was intended as a display of splendour, yet with implicit aesthetics in the symbolic usage of the cloth.

Amongst the Yorubas, precisely in areas like Oyo, Saaki and Iseyin, there is the aso-oke cloth. This cloth is hand woven, and mostly used as symbols of political and social prestige. The aso-oke is woven, by both men and women. But Asankitikpi (2007) has noted that, most times, aso-oke woven by women serve domestic purposes. But in places like Owo, Kaaba and Ijebu, where the weavers are predominantly women, their products ascends prominence. Such aso-oke cloth may serve domestic functions, while others assume social, political and economic status. These cloth forms also serve as symbols for religious and rituals as well as social activities. It is also believed that aso-oke cloth produced by women weavers has spiritual and medicinal powers. It brought the wearer of the cloth blessings, healing and protection.

Generally, amongst the Yorubas there are cloth forms that are held in high repute. Such cloth are mostly used for important ceremonies like chieftaincy, initiation into a club, cult or special groups, weddings and even for funerals. Lambs and Holms (1980) noted that the “Alaari” is used by kings and high-ranking Chiefs to welcome visitors in their palace. While the ‘Sanyan’ and ‘Etu’ cloth are also used by kings, but for official functions and ceremonies. Akinunmi (1992) pointed out that in Owo, the ‘Senghosen’ which literally means, ‘the cloth that takes all the money’ is about the most expensive cloth in that area. It is a cloth said to be of prestigious value, and set aside for only those who can afford it. It is used for very special occasions.

Still peculiar to the Owo people are some woven ritual cloth forms. As cited in Asankitikpi (2007), a number of taboos govern the production and use of such cloth forms. Specifically, the weavers of this ritual cloth are mostly women, who must be physically, spiritually and morally clean. On the part of the wearers, (whatever the sex) there are taboos surrounding their usage of this ritual cloth. One major taboo that cuts across the usage of most Owo ritual cloth centres on cleanliness of the individual, and avoiding sexual contacts before and during the wearing of the cloth. In the case of women, menstruation is regarded as state of uncleanness. Among the ritual cloth forms in Owo is the Giriyo, specially produced for the Ero festival (a particular age group initiation). Notably too, among the Bunu people of Kaaba, the aso-ipo or the red cloth is a ritual cloth. The significance of this cloth is in its ritual and political function in society.

There are yet some everyday use or basic cloth amongst the Yorubas that still hold potent. The ‘Kijapa’ is one of such cloth. As noted by Aremu (1982) kijapa is said to prevent miscarriages as well as cure barrenness. It is said that the Ifa priest prescribes the kijapa cloth for women in dire need of children as a cure. It is also believed that the potency in this cloth also attracts to its wearer, blessings, protection, prosperity, victory and health.

So far, we have tried to articulate the aesthetic symbolism even in the usage of the African cloth. The African cloth philosophy may not be fully appraised without eliciting the symbolism in colours. This is in the sense that oftentimes, the colour of the cloth and its usage complement one another. Colour symbolism in the African cloth culture is better understood in the cloth usage and association. Importantly too, colours in the African cloth culture oftentimes convey peculiar messages.

Generally across African cultures black and white are significant colours. Black symbolizes death and sadness, while the white colour is a symbol of purity, joy and peace. It is commonplace to find black cloth used at funerals, especially of one who died at an unripe age. In the Akan culture, the national mourning cloth is the adinkra, especially that with a black coloured background. However in some African culture, white may also be used as funeral cloth. It is used especially in cases when the person died at a ripe (old) age. In most cases, the deceased is wrapped in white cloth before being laid in the coffin. This makes a final passage from the land of the living to that of the Spirits. Specifically in some part of Igbo land, white cloth is mostly used for mourning. This may largely stem from their early embrace of Christianity, and their belief in the resurrection. They also have other cultural reasons for adopting the colour for mourning. Amongst the Itsekiris, the one mourning begins with the black cloth and after a few months, transits into a dark blue cloth, then light blue.

In some other African cultures, for deeper symbolic reasons, red cloth is used for funerals. Among the Ebiras and Bunu peoples of the confluence area of central Nigeria, the “aso ipo” is used for funerals. According to Picton (1980)

“The colour red is highly appropriate for the burial and post burial rites of a man of age, wealth and status, as far as the Igbiras are concerned, ... red is a colour associated with success and achievement”

In ceremonies as above, the aso ipo is hung in front of the deceased house. It is in this regard that Renne (1992) has asserted that the case of the Bunu people use of red cloth in commemorative funerals, tend to shed light on colour symbolism in the African culture.

Still on the peculiarity of the red cloth in the African culture. Besides its usage at funerals, it is also symbolic of danger, blood and at other times, spiritual power. In the Benin culture, the red cloth is suggestive of threat, power and calls for respect for its wearers, (Ben-Amos, 1978). The Benins call the red cloth, ‘ododo’. In this context, ododo is different from ‘baa’ or common red colour. Nevadomsky and Inneh (1983) have said that garment in the red ododo flannel version are worn by the Uzama chiefs, particularly at festivals. In this case, the ododo is symbolic of the strength to overcome evil or danger. Thus, when the cloth is put on at certain ceremonies, it is for additional protection against threatening evil forces.

The ododo is also a familiar name in the Itsekiri cloth culture. It is a scarlet red cloth associated with leadership amongst the Itsekiris. It is usually a sash worn as part of the formal attire of the Olu’s (King) chiefs. Also in the Esan culture, the “ukpododo” meaning red cloth (because the colours are dominated by red) is a prestigious cloth. In the Esan cloth philosophy, a man’s wealth does not consist of how many wives and children he has, but in the number of ukpododo he possesses. Culturally, ukpododo expresses the wealth status of the owner. This

cloth also has its spiritual relevance. It is used at the masquerade ritual known as ‘irukpon nahimhiin’ specifically in Ugboha clan and some other parts of Esan land. In the same way the Benins also use the ododo, as a sacred red cloth to adorn shrines. When this is done, the ododo carries some spiritual meaning.

Still on the ritual and spiritual meaning of red cloth, in the Yoruba and Benin ritual culture, the red cloth is significant especially in the worship of some deities. In both traditions, Ogun is depicted in red colour. This is symbolic of the fierceness, violence, anger, fire and blood that is associated with it. Thus, at ritual worships the devotees are usually clothed in red cloth. In the same vein, devotees of Shango and the god of thunder wear red cloth at worship. Significantly though, these worshipers even in their perceived fierceness still wear white beads. This tends to compliment the nature of the god, one who is quick to anger, yet quick to cool. The white bead symbolizes the latter, while the red cloth expresses the actual nature of Shango – anger and violence.

White in the African colour symbolism, signifies, on the average, purity, peace, holiness and cleanliness. Among the Dogons of West Africa, the white cloth is thought to be linked to water spirits and therefore has spiritual healing. In the same way, in the worship of Olokun and Malokun peculiar to the Benins and Yorubas respectively, the use of the white cloth is significant. These two gods are associated with peace, purity, holiness and sacredness. To therefore associate with the gods, the worshippers usually appear in white costumes. Audu (1980) has also noted that the white costumes of the Priests and Priestesses of these deities also carry red patterns. Just like the shrine of Olokun displays red fabric at a corner. In the explanation of Audu (1980), the red cloth in the Benin culture is symbolic too, of Ogun, the god of iron. This goes to express their religious view that Ogun and Olokun complement one another. Significantly, in Benin culture when chiefs are to make official appearance or have transactions in the royal palace, they generally put on white garment. White for the Benins is the colour of chalk, and stands for purity, joy and good fortune.

Generally, the symbolism in colours as it pertains to cloth in the African culture is inexhaustible. However a synopsis of colour symbolism in the Akan kente cloth expresses the African philosophy of the deeper aesthetics inherent. Colours of the kente cloth has its visual effects as well as its underlying symbolic meaning. In the weaving of the kente cloth, when colours of yarns are combined in peculiar ways, they tend to reflect the significance of the cloth. Essentially too, the designs, motifs and colours put together tend to portray a variety of implied concepts. This range from just a display of talents in the creativity of the weaver, to religion, philosophies and expression of family lineage.

Conclusion

So far, this paper tried to appraise the visual effect, as well as the underlying aesthetic symbolism inherent in the African cloth philosophy. Africans in their culture communicate their beliefs, philosophies and understanding of human existence. The cloth as metaphor reflects all aspects of the African life and living, and the relationship between the inside and the outside. Specifically, the African Cloth conception in the peculiarities of its designs, motifs, colours and usage oftentimes convey message. Only the owners of the cloth can unravel the untold stories and messages in their cloth. No doubt the Africans have an insightful, reflexive and reciprocal relationship with their cloth.

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