

## **Wearing the cloth: A west African tradition**

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The tradition of wearing cloth in West Africa is deeply rooted in the region's culture, history, and social structures, reflecting identity, status, and symbolism. West African textiles, such as kente, adinkra, and bogolanfini (mud cloth), are rich in symbolic meaning, passed down through generations, and are used in various ceremonial, social, and everyday contexts.

Here are some key aspects of the tradition:

### **Cultural Identity and Symbolism**

- Patterns and colors: In West Africa, cloth is not just functional but also communicates a range of meanings. Different patterns, colors, and symbols are often used to represent various aspects of the wearer's life, such as social status, ethnic identity, and life events like birth, marriage, or death. Kente cloth in Ghana, with its intricate patterns, is associated with royalty, nobility, and sacredness. Each color and pattern in kente has specific meanings; for instance, gold represents wealth, while green symbolizes growth.

- Adinkra symbols: In Ghana, adinkra cloth features symbolic motifs that convey philosophical, religious, or social messages. The motifs, like Gye Nyame (symbol of God's supremacy) or Sankofa (the importance of learning from the past and returning to our roots), are printed on fabrics, allowing people to express their beliefs and values visually.

### **Cloth as a Social Marker**

- Status and hierarchy: In many West African societies, the type and quality of cloth one wears are indicators of their social status. Historically, the most expensive and elaborate fabrics, such as silk kente or imported European cloth, were reserved for royalty, chiefs, or people of high rank. Cloth worn during special occasions like funerals, weddings, and religious festivals differs from everyday clothing.

- Aso-ebi tradition: In countries like Nigeria, the tradition of aso-ebi, where a group of people wears matching fabrics at ceremonies, especially weddings, is a symbol of unity, kinship, and solidarity. This communal aspect of wearing cloth is a key feature of West African society.

### **Spiritual and Ceremonial Significance**

- Rites of passage: Cloth plays an important role in rites of passage, such as naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. In many traditions, specific cloths are reserved for these events. For instance, white cloth may be used for celebrations or rites associated with purity and peace, while black or dark-colored cloths are typically used for mourning.

- Ancestral connections: Some fabrics, such as bogolanfini (mud cloth) in Mali, have spiritual significance. The designs on the cloth are linked to stories and traditions passed down through the generations, often representing the wearer's connection to their ancestors or the land.

### **Weaving Traditions**

- Kente weaving: Among the Ashanti and Ewe people of Ghana and Togo, kente cloth is handwoven on looms in long, narrow strips that are later sewn together. Traditionally, only men weave kente, and it

requires great skill and time. The cloth is associated with royalty, and its use was once restricted to kings and nobility.

- Bogolanfini (mud cloth): In Mali, bogolanfini is made by women who dye cotton fabrics with fermented mud to create unique patterns. This process has ritual significance and is often passed down from mother to daughter, making it a key component of women's cultural heritage in the region.

### **Colonial Influence and Globalization**

- During the colonial period, European textile manufacturers, particularly from the Netherlands, began producing wax prints inspired by Javanese batik, which were then exported to West Africa. These African wax prints became hugely popular, and although they originated outside the continent, they have been embraced and indigenized, becoming part of the cultural identity in many West African countries.

- These wax prints are often used in everyday wear but also feature prominently in special occasions. Many of the designs have acquired symbolic meaning in local contexts, representing various cultural, political, or social themes.

### **Contemporary Influence**

- In modern times, traditional West African cloths have experienced a revival in fashion, both locally and globally. African designers incorporate traditional weaving and dyeing techniques with contemporary styles, making traditional textiles accessible to younger generations and blending ancient practices with global trends.

- Many West African artists, including visual artists and fashion designers, use textiles to explore themes of cultural identity, history, and social change, thus connecting the past with the present through artistic expression.

Overall, the tradition of wearing cloth in West Africa is a powerful cultural practice that reflects the region's deep history, social structures, and artistic creativity. It is both an art form and a medium of communication that connects individuals with their community, ancestors, and broader cultural heritage.