



## Kente Cloth

Although *Kente* cloth, as we know it today was developed in the 17th Century AD by the Ashanti people of Ghana , it has its roots in a long tradition of weaving in Africa dating back to about 3000 BC.

The origin of Kente is explained through legend and historical accounts. Legend goes that two men: Ota Karaban and Kwaku Ameyaw of Bonwire (now the leading Kente weaving centre in Ashanti), learned the art of weaving by observing a spider weaving its web. Taking a cue from the spider, they wove a strip of raffia fabric and later improved upon their skill. They reported their discovery to their chief Nana Bobie, who in turn reported it to the Asantehene (The Ashanti Chief) at that time. The Asantehene adopted it as a royal cloth and encouraged its development as a cloth of prestige reserved for special occasions.

Historical accounts trace the origin of Kente weaving to early weaving traditions in ancient West African Kingdoms that flourished between 300 A.D. and 1600 A.D. Archaeological research has dated examples of narrow-strip cloths woven in West Africa as early as the 11th Century A.D. and perhaps earlier.

While Kente Cloth may have its roots in the 11th Century, there is an abundance of pictorial and archaeological evidence proving the existence of a weaving industry as early as 3200 BC. In its cultural context of use, Kente is more than just a cloth. Like most of Africa's visual art forms, Kente is a visual representation of history, philosophy,

ethics, oral literature, religious belief, social values and political thought. Originally, its use was reserved for their royalty and limited to special social and sacred functions.

Kente cloth is traditionally made on a hand made loom and, like the motifs in the cloth, the loom has symbolic meaning and is accorded a great deal of respect. Yarns for weaving come in a variety of forms and qualities. In the past yarns were either spun from locally grown cotton or unravelled from cotton and silk cloths imported from Europe and Asia. Today, factory made cotton, silk or spun rayon yarns are obtained from factories in Ghana and outside Ghana. Various colours of yarns may be combined in particular ways to reflect the symbolic significance of the cloth. Quality of yarns used in weaving a particular cloth reflects on the level of prestige associated with the cloth. Silk yarns are usually considered the most prestigious and are therefore the most highly valued. Silk cloth, in the past were reserved for royalty and the wealthy.

An average width of a strip is 4 inches. Several strips are then carefully arranged and hand-sewn together to obtain a desired size. Tradition has it that Kente is woven mainly by men. Women, in the past, played a significant role by spinning raw cotton into yarns, dyeing yarns into desired colours, sewing strips together to form large cloths and assisting in the marketing of the cloths. Today, factory spun yarns have replaced hand-spun yarns, and therefore, the woman's role is mainly in the area of sewing strips together and marketing the cloth.

