Material Culture, African Textiles and National Identity

by

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ABSTRACT

MATERIAL CULTURE, AFRICAN TEXTILES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Traditionally woven textiles are resilient artefacts that carry the history and memories of ethnic groups, nations and individuals. I argue that textiles are inextricably tied to the political and cultural definition, expression and continuity of African national identities. Examining works of contemporary Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, Congolese painter Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, and Senegalese artist Aissa Dione, I consider their various expressions of national identity and African identity and culture through their uses of, and references to, African textiles. What were the initial uses and the purposes of these textiles and how have their uses and importance changed over time? How do contemporary artists access these histories to inform cultural expressions of contemporary African identity and nationalisms, within Africa and on the global stage? By examining the relationships between traditional textiles and contemporary art, I argue for the fundamental importance of material culture in the creation and expression of African identities.
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African Textiles and National Identities

According to UNESCO, the process of making barkcloth [in Uganda] existed before weaving was invented, making it one of the oldest textiles in history. Thus, UNESCO declared it a “Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage” in 2005 and added it to the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2008.

https://tdsblog.com/barkcloth

On June 8, 2020, Congressional Democrats wore Kente cloth stoles and knelt on the floor of the U.S. Capitol Visitors Center for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the amount of time former police officer Derek Chauvin was said to have knelt on the neck of George Floyd. This act happened just before a press conference announcing the proposed “Justice in Policing Act.” The Democrats’ actions went viral and opinion was split about whether wearing the cloth was appropriate or even necessary.¹ The controversy was over the meaning of the cloth as an expression of African identity, and its use in this context as an appropriation of that identity, an act of colonization masquerading as an act of reconciliation. In this thesis, I examine the meaning of the Kente and Adinkra cloths as material expressions of African identity and Ghanaian nationalism and demonstrate that the reappropriation of Kente and Adinkra in the work of contemporary Ghana-born artist El Anatsui asserts a reconstituted Ghanaian identity through the re-animation of these key cultural artifacts in a post-colonial context. Kente cloth has become

central to the expression of contemporary Ghanaian identity and a means of claiming an authentic past that was not eradicated by colonialism. The exploration of these ideas has also led me to examine the nature of colonial histories, which overwrite and interrupt Indigenous histories, even though Indigenous histories continue. These Indigenous histories are often told in the persistence of textiles. In the words of the Ghanian architect David Adjaye, “[I]n some conditions, the architecture of textile is more relevant than in other conditions or the opacity of the material form. Pattern in the world of scarce materiality and a hybridity becomes a way of creating a new authenticity.”

I begin my exploration of textiles and African national identity in this introduction by examining the role of material culture in the creation of identity, and the place of textiles within the discourse of material culture. The effectiveness of El Anatsui’s use of Kente cloth as a language of expression within his work is grounded in its long history in Ghana, a history that preceded colonization and persisted through the erasures of identity created by ancient and then early modern European colonialism and the waves of independence across Africa in the 1950s and the 1960s. Colonization suppressed certain material traditions and fundamentally altered others, and these changes disrupted histories and identities. Because of this, traditional textiles can have two or more histories; their authentic origins and practices and their colonial adaptations and appropriations. Understanding national identities in the context of Africa also requires understanding the dichotomies of African identity and distinct national identities, and the political contradictions embodied by African unification and national self-determination, which are sometimes in conflict. The question of African nationalism is unique in that it can

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refer to both Pan-Africanism and/or to the distinct countries of the continent, many of them reconstituted through the re-drawing of borders and states in the wake of 1960s anti-colonial liberation. Pan-Africanism refers to the philosophies that promote a single and united Africa. As a political movement, Pan Africanism fought for the liberation and unity of Africa after slavery and the interactions with modernity. In the eyes of Pan Africanists, the African continent was and is seen as the site for freedom. The colonial nation-states that were created after the Berlin Conference of 1885, “formed the foundation for the continued destruction of African history, culture, and unity”³ but it did not negate the idea of a united Africa. African nationalism refers to the set of ideologies and political movements motivated by the idea of national self-determination. Robert Rotberg believes that the creation of territories by colonial powers and the policies and practices they forced upon these territories, led to the Indigenous inhabitants coming together accepting their status as nationals of the same nation. This led them to “think almost exclusively in terms of achieving their freedom from alien rule within the perimeters of their colonial existence.”⁴ This is different from Pan-Africanism, which seeks to unify several or all African nations under one umbrella. Issa G. Shivji believes that Pan-Africanism gave birth to nationalism and that “[n]ationalism, ethnicism and the concept of the nation-state, ideas associated with the colonial legacy, were part of the political motivation to Pan-Africanism, which actively forced decolonization.”⁵

In this thesis, I am examining distinct nationalisms within the continent, focusing on textile histories, and specifically on textile history in Ghana. I am interested in Ghana because as a young Ghanian woman studying African identity within the colonial context of a Canadian university, I am exploring aspects of my own lived experience and political realities.

In African art, textiles are a particularly vital aspect of material culture production and, I argue, are inextricably tied to the political and cultural definition, expression and continuity of African national identities. Textiles are what the sociologists of African culture Olayinka Akanle, Olutayu and Fadina consider “resilient artefacts,” capable of recalling, remaking and redefining the identity of a people. My research starts from a place that is most familiar to me and one that placed me on the path of Art History and Visual Culture. As an urban Western-educated Ghanaian, I have observed, in Ghana, a lack of appreciation of various local African traditions and culture, within the current generation of young adults. In fact, in Africa, culture and art are everywhere but it often seems that people don’t engage with them in terms of understanding what they mean. The appreciation, importance and understanding that should normally be attributed to tradition, identity, and culture is slowly on the decline. I believe that the Ghanaian culture and on a larger scale African culture is slowly atrophying. This is because with each passing generation, there are fewer people interested in the traditions and cultures of the nation and the ethnic groups within the nations. I, personally, know very little of the traditions, festivals and culture of the Ewe people to whom I belong, nor do I speak the Ewe language. I never made an effort to learn about these aspects of my heritage and this seems to be the same to other within my generation and younger. What is the reason for this atrophy? How can this atrophying be

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stopped? How can the Ghanaian people and Africans revive and redefine their cultures and identities? As Africans, we live in countries that are interconnected on one continent. Unless you are interested, there is no way for you to know about the various cultures and traditions that exist. I want to build an appreciation for African art and history. That starts by showing that art and material culture play a major role in the lives of Africans, sometimes even when they do not notice or even intentionally use them. The research aims to highlight the importance of tradition and heritage in the figuration of a decolonized pan-African nationalism, grounded in the realization of individual national identities in the African nation-states. I argue that traditional textile art is accomplishing this nationalist project, informing contemporary art practices, both local and global, that are bringing the past into the future. Confronting the future can only happen if we confront the past. I am not proud of this, but my first true introduction to African art was in an art history class I took with Professor Suzanne Gott at the University of British Columbia. Professor Gott was teaching a course about women from my home country. She introduced the importance of objects that I was used to and had taken for granted. Although it was part of a Ghanaians everyday life, I did not realize the importance the actions and rituals that individuals carried out. I realized then was how little I knew about tradition and culture in Ghana. Learning about Ghanaian and African culture outside of Africa made me realize that I was not fully in touch with my culture or heritage. I was just living in the present not understanding that was so much I had missed about the history of my home country. Having an “outsider” teach me about African cultures and history made me feel some embarrassment since I realized how little I knew. Even the present I was living began to seem empty because there was so much being missed or looked over by the current generation which will eventually trickle-down future generations. The gradual decline in tradition and culture heritage had been
going on for some time now but being in Suzanne Gott’s class highlighted just how bad it had
gotten. Sitting in Gott’s African art history classes, I began to feel utterly useless and
disappointed in myself as I was unable to constructively contribute to the classes apart from the
accurate pronunciation of certain Twi words. Gott’s article “Asante Hightimers and the
Fashionable Display of Women’s Wealth in Ghana”7 revealed how little I knew about my home
country Ghana and the African continent. Learning about the African continents past and their
traditions highlighted the rich history of Africa and its importance to the growth of the nations.
Art history classes highlighted the importance of history, traditions and culture in the growth and
development of nations and identity. What gave the added drive to pursue this topic was the fact
that I did not learn about it in while I was still in Africa. Although there has been research
investigating the nationalism, national identity, and textiles in Africa, the impact has not been
felt or the solutions suggested have not really been applied within the nations. What my research
hopes to do is to open the eyes of Africans for them to realize the importance and benefits
tradition and heritage will have on their lives when their value is appreciated and applied
appropriately. My research investigates what needs to be done to ensure that nationalism and
national identities are created. It will prove that unity and peace can be and needs to be realized
for growth to take place

In this thesis I am examining the use of historical textiles as visual referents or as actual
materials in the work of three contemporary African artists. I have chosen these artists because
their practices are clearly based in the historical textile culture of their individual nations.
Relying on their insights, and visually examining their work, I explain how the use of historical

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7 Suzanne Gott, “Asante Hightimers and the Fashionable Display of Women’s Wealth in Contemporary Ghana,”
textiles in their work speaks to the ideas of decolonizing the history of their individual African nations, and to the larger issue of global African nationalism.

I examine the use of historical textiles or textile motifs by African artists from a post-colonial perspective. Specifically, I examine textiles as expressions of post-colonial African global nationalism as well as signifiers of distinct national identities within African itself. I demonstrate that the use of these textiles by contemporary artists is a reclamation of pre-colonial identity and an act of decolonization. I studied each artist by consulting their artist statements; reading, watching or listening to interviews they’ve given about their work; examining exhibition reviews and, where available, consulting critical scholarship that examines their practice and their work. I began my research by framing my study within the context of material culture studies and nationalism, specifically African textiles to African identity. It is important to explore what these artists produce and the messages they wish to convey to their audience. This will provide evidence to prove or disprove the integration of European ideals into African culture. John Picton, Geneviève Zubrzycki and Lisa Binder have focused on textiles in the context of material culture studies. Undressing Ethnicity (Yinka Shonibare) and Lisa Binder’s El Anatsui’s: Transformations offer insights into the artists’ creative processes and inspirations.

Picton asserts that the attribution of ethnicity to artworks is problematic. Picton states that to look for obvious signs of “Yorubaness” (and Africaness) within Yinka Shonibare’s artworks “is to misunderstand and oversimplify the complexity and sophistication manifest in working through of questions of identity-and-difference in his personal trajectory and current circumstances.” Picton believes that Shonibare uses African print textiles and photography to

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9 Picton, “Yinka Shonibare.”, 68.
“contest ethnic, racist, and other stereotypes.”

Picton suggests that every individual, “irrespective of labels and geographies, is the locus of several dimensions of identity-and-difference; and the manner in which we interpret the world and by our placing of things in it to these (and other) ends is inevitably complex and negotiable, and never all of one piece.”

Picton states that identity developed as a result of debates about language and literature, and about dress; through writing history; through an intellectual interest in mythic and ritual tradition, an interest that did not hamper widespread conversion to Islam and Christianity and through education, journalism, and political action and as such should not be defined by location.

Lisa Binder asserts that Anatsui is not necessarily trying to reconstruct history but rather “to engage with a present moment that is enmeshed with signifiers of the past.”

Binder states that Anatsui’s work is meant to inform global histories of memory, transience and more importantly transformation.

Picton and Binder expound on the mindset with which the artists create their works. These explanations towards the artist process caused me to explore the topic of globalization and modernity as their belief in the boundarilessness of ethnicity and identity caused me explore ways in which these identities could be created without confining or changing the nation or its people. Geneviève Zubrzycki’s *National Matters: Materiality, Culture, and Nationalism* demonstrates the inextricable connection between material culture and national identity. It is my belief that some, if not most, of the culture and `visual artefacts produced in post-colonial Africa were the result of the forced hybridity that occurred between African and European cultures. When authentic African artefacts were looted and stolen and now reside

10 Ibid., 72.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
mostly in museums in European countries where their meanings and usefulness have been negated, this led to the destruction of the social, economic, and cultural context for the production and reproduction of cultural heritage, African artisans and artists had, and still have, few authentic material relics of their past to inform their cultural identity. If these items were returned and a proper understanding of them was created and used to teach African artists and scholars, there could be a change in the artistic production within African countries, one that is influenced by both African art of the past and modern African art. I will specifically consider contemporary artists, and their exploration of national identity through their creative engagements with the historical material cultures of their countries: the artists El Anatsui, of Ghana who uses bottle tops, a detritus of Western culture, to create textile-like sculptures; Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga of the Democratic Republic of Congo whose paintings address the dwindling signs of tradition and culture in the current Congolese society; and Aissa Dione, a French-Senegalese textile designer and artist who is reviving the lost practice of Manjak weaving. In critically examining their work, I identify and explain their use of material culture and how the objects they use and refer to are essential to the effectiveness of their messages about national identity and nationhood.

For further insights into the question of nationalism and African textiles I read the work of Anthony D. Smith, Ernest Geller, Ayi Kyei Armah, and Michael Billig. I was particularly interested in the ways that the use of historical textiles by contemporary African artists can be seen as decolonizing strategy to reclaim African histories. To examine the question of decolonization I read Sarah Van Beurden and Raymond Betts Decolonization. Finally, I studied the global nature of contemporary art practice and the emergence of a globalized view of African nationalism informed by those art practices I read Issa G. Shivji.
National identity, according to Anthony D. Smith, involves some sense of political community, history, territory, patria, citizenship, common values, and traditions. Smith believes that nations have a set of common understandings and aspirations, sentiments and ideas, that tie the population together and to their homeland. Smith views national identity as multi-dimensional and consisting of five fundamental attributes: historic territory or homeland, common myths and historical memories, a common mass public culture, common legal rights and duties for all members and a common economy with territorial mobility for members.\(^\text{15}\)

According to Montserrat Guibernau, national identity has five dimensions: psychological, cultural, territorial, historical and political. National identity affects the nation, art and the economy.\(^\text{16}\)

I think that some modern African nations do not have a clear, accurate and precise or distinct national identity, even though Africans are very adamant about the fact that they possess a distinct identity. Some things that are said to exclusively belong to Africans, or to constitute their identity, are influenced by European culture, an effect of colonial rule and assimilation. This dates to the first arrival of Europeans on the African continent, an arrival that can be tied to the ideal of social Darwinism, the drive to ‘evolve’ Africa. Although Darwinism was not the primary source for the Europeans’ actions or racist beliefs, it still provided a means for them to justify their actions. Western cultures were viewed as the most advanced and superior. Societies outside of Europe, especially those in Africa, were considered primitive. Karl Pearson and Benjamin Kidd observe that the colonizers saw: “English political, economic and cultural control of “inferior” races as not only necessary to England’s political and economic survival, but also


important for bringing civilization to the unenlightened.\textsuperscript{17} In the process they exploited and
looted the “exotic” materials, people and wealth of Africa. This was followed by an oppressive
colonial rule that lasted for years. This influenced the works and products Africans made as well
as the nation and the economy. During the colonial period, local material culture and its products
were either taken away, stolen or destroyed. Although African material culture was not
completely erased, the colonial oppressors did their very best to prevent that culture, its
practices, and belief system from prospering or progressing. The colonialists introduced a new
religion and new ways of doing things. I will investigate how the introduction of new cultural
practices influenced the production of African material culture and how that, in turn, influenced
and affected the global view of ‘Africa’.

The post-colonial legacy has left many African people feeling as though they do not have
an identity to call their own. They had it before, but it was taken away from them and, in its
place, there exists a combination of cultures, a combination that may not be longer be enough for
effective for nation building. This resultant culture is a forced hybridity, rather than an
intercultural materiality. I will be investigating the departures from traditional ways of visual
production that occurred during colonial times that created a “modern” visual art. These new
ways of visual production can be referred to as cultural products of trauma.

In this thesis I have limited the scope of my research to three artists who best represent
the use of African textiles in their contemporary practice, and who frame their work specifically
within the scope of African nationalism and identity. I have chosen artists who work with highly
recognizable African textile motifs in order to demonstrate how they have reclaimed these

textiles as specific cultural expressions. The artists explore what Ayi Armah would refer to as a cultural reawakening grounded in abandoning the Western narrative of colonization in order “to retrieve our suppressed ability to conceive of our wholeness in both spatial and temporal terms.”

The artists I have chosen are recognized internationally and are successful within the global marketplace of contemporary art practice.

**Nationalism**

Scholars like Benedict Anderson, Maurice Halbwachs, and Eric J Hobsbawm explore the idea of nationhood and nationalism and offer insight to how this phenomenon occurred. Nationalism is a concept that has been described in clear terms or as anomaly that cannot truly be defined. Anderson presents some tentative suggestions for a more satisfactory interpretation of the 'anomaly' of nationalism. According to Anderson, “Nationness and nationalism are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy.” The text attempts to explain why nationhood and nationalism are important endeavors to pursue. This helps to explain why it is necessary for African nations to have a national identity and why forming an attachment to a country and is people will be beneficial in the long run.

Nationalism and national identity are matters of scholarly debate, most of which are centered on tensions between the modernity of current nations and the importance of their histories. It also becomes a matter of separating the kind of nationalism and identity I am talking

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about from the brand of nationalism often linked to fascism. Benedict Anderson depicts the nation as an imagined community, one that is created out of political will. It is referred to as imagined because, although most citizens of a nation do not know each other, in their minds a communion exists among them. Anderson attributes the birth of nation-states, nationalism, and nationhood to print-languages and capitalism which emerged after the weakening of cultural roles: elite languages, dynastic empires, and a belief in the link between the cosmos and humankind. When analyzed and considered in conjunction with Michael Billig’s *Banal Nationalism*, we clearly see the role media may play in the dissemination of nationalism and nationhood. In *Banal Nationalism*, Billig refers to the ways the nation is represented in the everyday lives of its members and how this builds a sense of belonging through a shared national identity. In *Banal Nationalism*, the author theorizes that a person gains a national identity through everyday practices and habits. The individual is constantly learning and sometimes mindlessly participating in nationality or belonging. However, Billig fails to acknowledge various ways in which practices or habits may be formed. His focus is on media, but he is less concerned with how people will receive and react to the information they are subjected to by the media. Human beings and people belonging to the same country are not of a homogenous mindset. They have differing perspectives and ideas. His focus is on like-minded people. Billig also does not consider the state of the nation. Anderson and Billig are concerned with the non-ritual, daily performance of nationalism, and how these habits are defined by media, while Genevieve

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21 Ibid., 6.
22 Ibid., 36.
24 Billig, Banal Nationalism, 6.
Zubrzycki is more directly concerned with how material culture is deployed in formative and performative nationalism.

The heterogenous reality of nationalism is addressed by Ernest Gellner in *Nations and Nationalism*, in which he addressed the problems that may arise when a multicultural or multiethnic country strives to achieve nationalism. Gellner calls for one culture and ethnicity under one state, which pushes the ‘outside’ cultures out.\(^{25}\)

**Culture, Nationalism and Globalisation**

The concept of culture itself is a matter of much study in the context of material culture studies. In *Redefining Culture, Perspectives Across the Disciplines* (2006) several scholars pick up from Kluckhohn and Kroeber’s 1960s attempt to define the concept of culture by analyzing how the definition of culture has changed over time across various disciplines. The authors examine the changes that have occurred within the definitions and suggest ways these definitions can be usefully applied to cultural analysis. Their studies demonstrate that culture is a continuous and everchanging process that demands constant redefinition from multiple viewpoints. This multiplicity is particularly applicable to the analysis of African identities, both Pan-Africanism and nationalistic movements within individual African nation-states.

According to Baldwin defining culture as “a symbolic instance in which each group organizes its identity”\(^{26}\) does not acknowledge the impact of globalized communication and interaction. Culture is not a decorative endeavor where you pull it out every Sunday or for religious or spiritual occasions, it is “something constitutive of everyday interactions, insomuch

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as there are processes of signification in the workplace, in transportation, and in other ordinary movements.”

Culture is a part of all social practices but not every social practice is cultural: “the concept of culture has been taken to refer to something like collective subjectivity—that is, a way of life or outlook adopted by a community or a social class.” Defining culture as a learned behavior shows that culture is transmitted from generation to generation simply by being in contact with that particular group of people. No two cultures are the same, so trying to replace one culture with another will be a failure. The current status of Ghanaian identity is a combination of confusion and stagnation. This is a result of the colonial legacy and the influences of globalization that have taken place. Albert Dennis believes that globalization and technological advancements have led to “radical transformations into people’s cultures and traditions. And dictated a lopsided transfer of culture in favor of hegemonic global relationships that often promote Western culture against other ways of life.” Dennis believes that the continuous interaction of Africans with Euro-American civilization has resulted in the “gradual erosion of local traditions, and their replacement by television programs, video games, social ways of dressing, speaking and relating.”

By the end of this paper, I want to prove that a well-organized restitution of African cultural objects is essential for the establishment of a national identity. In *Spirit and Matter: The Materiality of Mozambican Prophet Healing*, Tracy Luedke makes mention of Rosalind Shaw’s differentiations between discursive memory and practical memory. Discursive memory relates to the “explicit, intentional narrative accounts of the past” whereas practical memory relates to

27 Baldwin, *Redefining Culture Perspectives, Across the Disciplines*, 123.
28 Ibid., 140.
30 Dennis. “Promoting Ghana’s traditional cultural aesthetics in Ghana’s most beautiful reality television show.”, 177.
memories that are “forgotten as history” because they live on through habits, social practices, ritual processes and embodied experiences. I am advocating for an environment where discursive memory can occur. Restituting the artefacts back to their native countries will create an environment where the scholars, experts and citizens can interact with these objects and find a way to incorporate them into contemporary environments without erasing their history and importance or disrupting these contemporary environments. The objects would not just be for display but used as learning tools; such use is also an act of preservation. Restitution will also create a more holistic appreciation of the art that is currently produced, especially post-colonial artworks that draw on pre-colonial history. If the message comes across clearly, it makes Africans aware of the importance of history and makes them understand that they are an amalgamation of different factors from the past. Once we understand, we will build a true identity as a nation. This identity informs better decisions for Africa, the future of its countries and their interactions with others (who they are as a people, what we need to change and fix). This informs their position in the world and how they are received locally and internationally. It affects the decisions that are made about the economy, arts, education. The African people seem to be in a receptive position because they are unaware of their identity. They take ideas from others to build themselves, but once they have an idea of who they are and understand themselves/ culture, they will have a better idea of what works best for them and they will have something unique to produce, unique policies to call their own, unique art that is true to who they are and truly establish themselves as a player within the global world.

In order to achieve the earlier mentioned goals of a national identity, the reception of globalization on the African continent needs to be understood. Globalization has both positive and negative impacts on nations. Research has shown that the negative impacts of globalization
on African countries far outweighs its positive impacts and therefore makes it very ill received. From an economic standpoint, globalization has emphasized the economic marginalization of African economies and “their dependence on a few primary goods for which demand, and prices are externally determined. This has, in turn accentuated poverty and economic inequality as well as the ability of the vast number of Africans to participate meaningfully in the social and political life of their countries.”\(^\text{31}\) Alhaji Ahmadu Ibrahim asserts that globalization brings with it cultural domination which leads to African countries losing their identities and their ability to interact with other cultures “on an equal and autonomous basis, borrowing from other cultures only those aspects that meet its requirements and needs.”\(^\text{32}\)

Issa G. Shivji views the so-called globalization as part of the second scramble for Africa. “The local manifestation of globalization is the neoliberal package enforced by imperialism through the triad of the International Monetary Fund–World Bank–World Trade Organization and donor policies and conditionalities on aid, debt and trade.”\(^\text{33}\) The presence of these organizations could be looked at as eroding the sovereignty and power of the State. The first scramble for Africa left the continent divided. The colonial economies that independent Africa inherited were woefully incompatible with each other and rather saw each other as competition. “Each of them, separately, voluntarily or otherwise, seeks association with metropolitan economies. African economies are not only incompatible but exhibit extreme uneven

development.”

“This would be minimized if the voice of Africa’s states was increased and strengthened in the world bodies” and this is what I hope my research will achieve.

The revitalization of tradition must respond to the exigencies of the present, even as it engages with the past, in order to be fully recognized by a contemporary audience and embraced within their own concepts of culture and identity. Current trends suggest that tradition must die to make way for modernity, which ensures an assimilation of existing practices with new practices. However, identity is not merely an abstract concept, but a recognition of cultural practices that foster opportunities for acceptance, positive change, and development to occur. Moving forward does not mean forgetting tradition, since both the past and the present can exist at the same time. To achieve this coeval synthesis, certain practices must be reintroduced into the society, but it is important to assess the means by which such practices are not only revived but can be sustained. This sustainability is often located within the mechanisms of the global marketplace, in which “authentic” cultural products produced through traditional craft practices may come to serve as national brands. Through actions taken by both the local governments and the indigenous people, craftsmen, and retailers, the cultural products created could become indicators of the nation and national identity. Through the cataloguing of patterns and symbols and their meanings, there will be a record of these “brands” and their meanings. By training and educating, especially retailers and nationals about these symbols and patterns, there is an opportunity for consumers to have a catered experience where they are buying the appropriate products with the right patterns and symbols that best suits the occasions, they are purchasing the products for. With the retailers knowing what the patterns and symbols mean, the consumers can

34 Shivji, “Pan-Africanism or Imperialism?, 214.
purchase products for the right occasion, which ensures that these “authentic” products are used in the right setting. When that precedent has been set and is fully functional, what could come about is a true appreciation of the product and the experience that is associated with purchasing it. The public will start to pay for the value of what they have purchased, appreciate its value and use it for the purpose it was intended. Once that understanding is achieved a true appreciation of the intricacies involved in these traditional practices, will lead of to better appreciation and understanding of its national value.

**Chapter Outline**

In Chapter One I investigate the Kente cloth, the traditional textile of Ghana, and examine the work of renowned Ghanaian artist El Anatsui. I turn to the artist El Anatsui, the issues of identity he explores in his work, and the specific ways he uses Kente patterns, expressed through weaving together found objects of Western manufacture, like bottle-caps, to express the contradictory histories of Ghana as a nation. Binder asserts that Anatsui’s sculpture often connote the “destructive power of trade, consumption, and globalization, potentially reinforcing that reality when manipulated into a sculpture.”

Binder believes that in order to appreciate El Anatsui’s work one will need to consider his work in “relation to the past, the ever-changing present, and possibly within new context and with new terminologies.” This current use of Kente can be considered a post-colonial reflection on identity and culture, one in which the cloth becomes a semantics for the reconsideration of what ‘African’ history means. Traditionally woven textiles can be seen as the holders of memories and histories of the countries’ population. In Sonja Andrew’s *Textile Semantics: Perception and Memory* we are

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37 Ibid., 36.
introduced to the semiotics of textiles and their ability to connect a group of people, to construct and convey certain thoughts and ideas. Andrew investigates the communicative potential of textiles and how they inform generations and exchanges between their makers, wearers, and viewers. Textiles draw attention by projecting personal identity through visual markers of status, wealth, and prestige. To “put on” cloth communicates different meanings to those fluent in these various styles. “We find that bodies and dress also help express and shape ideas about the most potent kinds of political and spiritual power thought to be available to human beings.”

“We make ourselves into projects—we use tactile materials to symbolize, shape, stretch, shrink, embellish, inflate, adorn, and stand in judgment of ourselves. We are our own handiwork, through the projected identities we imagine, impose, embrace, and fight against.”

We do all this through concrete means because we must communicate with one another and make our identity real for our own and other minds. Textiles enable us to unravel, recreate, and embody the perplexing formation of the human self. According to Paul Sharrad, “nationalism relies on producing an idea of tradition as foundation for collective identity.” The textiles that the Congolese citizens use and are presented in Kamuanga Ilunga’s paintings are universal to some parts of the African continent and African diaspora. As stated above, the Congolese natives


adopted the ways their Western masters dressed, unlike in the Pacific where a “compromise was usually worked out such as his being allowed to wear a shirt and tie but wearing a wrap instead of trousers.” Textiles can stimulate remembering, not through the strategic mnemonics of national monuments and events, or the mnemonic device of the souvenir, but rather through unplanned encounters with textiles in their various guises and in different contexts. Each attempt at recollection may reveal historical, cultural and personal data. The themes of ‘archiving’ memory and ‘materializing’ memory are explored through an analysis of works of artists who use textile media in their visual practice. The idea of identity is exemplified in the patterns, colors and designs of the textiles such as the Kente and Adinkra cloths of the Asante people of Ghana and the Kuba cloth from the Democratic Republic of Congo. They are true visual languages and tell the story of a royal family, an ethnic group, a people, a region, and or a country.

The evolution of the Kente cloth over time is a testament to how textiles can be used as a communicative and record keeping device. The Kente cloth became a symbol of resistance. Using E. Asamoah-Yaw and Osei-Bonsu Safo-Kantanka’s *Kente Cloth: History and Culture*, I explore the history of the Kente cloth and how it was used first by the Asante people of Ghana then by practically the entire nation. This book explores the growth of this textile and its impact. Although the book is relevant and an important resource in understanding the journey of the Asante people and the impact of colonization on the people and cloth, the text often reads as personal and sometimes judgmental of the path that the country adopted to survive colonial and independence. Asamoah-Yaw and Safo-Kantanka delve into the history of Ghana and how the Kente cloth was used and being Ghanaians themselves, present an aspect of the Ghanaian

sentiment on the way the country’s’ history progressed and how some people feel about the
current state of the country. Asamoah-Yaw and Safo-Kantanka briefly bring to the reader’s
attention the changes that are occurring within the weaving industry and how these changes raise
questions about the authentic quality of the Kente textile. In the book, changes like weaving
wider sizes of the textile are categorized as bad practices. The new developments are
acknowledged as inevitable trends as each generation has different needs and uses for the cloth.
Asamoah-Yaw and Safo-Kantanka offer their insights into why the Kente cloth has become so
popular outside the African continent. The constant and integrated presence of British culture
within Ghanaian society irks the authors and this shows in the writings. This is the cause of the
“misery and decadence in Ghana and indeed many other Africans nations.” Although the
positive impact foreign entities have had in Africa is acknowledged, Asamoah-Yaw and Safo-Kantanka stress that the positive influences do not cancel out the substantial damage they
inflicted. The foreign organizations failed to completely erase the indigenous cultures and
convert the Africans, hence the African people were left in a limbo, where European cultures
have frozen the African mind. For these authors it is not a case of modernity versus tradition
but a case of mimicry versus authenticity. The authors are waiting for the day of cultural
revolution when African traditions and culture become a part of the everyday lives of the African
citizens. This chapter shows just how a piece of the past can be carried along on a journey of
self-discovery and growth. By introducing El Anatsui, an artist who experienced colonization
and independence, and who creates works reminiscent of the Kente cloth, we can see the impact
the cloth has had. Doran H. Ross also offers insight into the importance of the cloth to entire

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46 Asamoah-Yaw and Safo-Kantanka, *Kente Cloth: It’s History and Afrikan Culture*, 205
country as a whole and not just to the Asante people in *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*. Ross investigates the various ways the Kente textile has been used not just by the people in Ghana, but by several other Africans both in and out of the continent. The Kente cloth was once only worn on special occasions. Today, it is one of the best-known African textiles and is used in many ways, from hats, ties, and bags to furniture and upholstery. Its patterns have been woven into the everyday fabric of life. This cloth addresses various parts of one’s identity from their history to their place in society. For many, Kente cloth links two continents, celebrating the cultural heritage of Africans and African Americans. In *Wrapped in Pride*, seven scholars walk us through an extensive examination of the history of conventional Ghanaian weaving and its impact on cultures across and beyond Africa’s shore. These scholars present the history of Kente from its earliest use in Ghana to its present-day impact in the African Diaspora. Ross and the other scholars offer an exhaustive historical account of the Kente cloth, and they tie it in with the voices of the people who have a personal relationship with the cloth. The compilation of articles from various authors allows for differing perspectives and opinions to be heard and analyzed. What these texts make clear is that the Kente cloth has become the universal symbol of solidarity among black people. The texts used helped me make arguments and offer varied thoughts about the future of the cloth and its importance to the people and its ability to help form and maintain an identity and form a sense of commonality between the people of the country. Boatema Boateng explores the journey of the Kente and Adinkra cloths and examines what these changes mean to the value of the cloths *Adinkra and Kente Cloth in History, Law, and Life*. Boateng analyzes the steps that have been taken to protect the

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intellectual property of the cloth and what it would mean for the makers and users of the cloth with new regulations being applied to its manufacture. By chronicling the steps being taken to protect the value of this traditional cloth, we see some of the feelings that arise from the globalization and changes made to the cloth. A new perspective from the political end that alludes to the importance of the cloth to the people of Ghana offers a new avenue to explore in terms of the impact of traditional textiles to an African society.

To further explore the semantics of cloth, I touch briefly on the work of two other contemporary African artists who use references to historical textiles in their work as a means of contemplating issues of identity and nationalism. In Chapter Two, I look at the painter Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose references to Kuba cloth explore both its historical and colonial manufacture. Originally hand-woven in raffia, Kuba patterns were appropriated into cotton wax-print manufacture during colonization. Kuba print fabric is ubiquitous in the global market, and it has also been adapted to African manufacture. As a contemporary Congolese citizen, Kamuanga Ilunga’s paintings offer a platform for examining the tensions between traditional and contemporary textiles and issues of authenticity and identity. Again, these tensions become a lens for examining the multivalent aspects of African history.

In Chapter Three, I also look at the work of designer Aissa Dione, whose creation of a variety of clothing pieces and interior design objects based on the traditions of Senegalese Manjak cloth allows me to explore textile practices at the intersections of culture and commodity, history and modernity. In Jill Bryant’s Dazzling Women Designers, which chronicles the lives and achievements of female designers, the chapter on Aissa Dione gives the

reader a look at the course of Dione’s life and her achievements as a textile designer and interior designer. Her work demonstrates that the revitalization of tradition must respond to the exigencies of the present, even as it engages with the past, in order to be fully recognized by a contemporary audience and embraced within their own concepts of culture and identity. The dissemination of such commodities can forge a national ‘brand’ that has diasporic as well as local resonance in the creation of national identity. In their book *On Collective Memory*, culture theorists Maurice Halbwachs and Lewis Coser conclude that different groups of people each have distinctive memories, exclusive to their shared experience, and developed over long periods of time. These individuals “draw on that context to remember and recreate the past.”

Halbwachs and Coser introduce the concept of historical memory in which events are not directly experienced or remembered. Instead, cultural memories are to “be stimulated in indirect ways through reading or listening or in commemoration and festive occasions when people gather together to remember in common the deeds and accomplishments of long-departed members of the group.” The evocation of this cultural memory “[takes] an organized program of cultural production – an art world nestled in the administration – to advance state power.” In order for political change to occur, there needs to be a change in what Halbwachs and Coser call the political imaginaries, which can be staged through a deliberate artistic strategy. For example, the creation of Versailles under Louis XIV was accomplished by “artists, artisans, and scholars who contributed to this program using classically inspired art and artifacts to craft images of

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50 Jill Bryant, *Dazzling Women Designers*, Women’s Hall of Fame Series (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2010).
imperial power for France.” According to Chandra Mukerji, the objects of desire created in the highly artificial world of Versailles were more effective agents of statesmanship than the actual political discourses taking place in contemporary France. Professor of anthropology Dorothy Holland and her co-authors claim that “Identities become important outcomes of participation in communities of practice in ways analogous to our notion that identities are formed in the process of participating in activities organized by figured worlds.” According to Holland artifacts are the means by which such figured worlds “are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful.”

Textiles were and are a primary agent of culture, language and identity. These traditionally woven textiles act as markers of ethnic and national identity and cultural values. The textiles were and to some extents still are transmitters of culture from one generation to the next. They demonstrate the fluid nature of culture and visual non-verbal languages.

Charles Sanders Peirce’s study of semiotics (signs and their meanings) introduced the concept of icons, indexes, and symbols. Peirce defined symbols as having a convention-based relationship to their objects, icons as having specific attributes in common with the object it is referring to, and indexes as being directly influenced by the objects. Keane offers an analysis into how signs, in this case textiles, are motivated and become avenues through which identity is displayed or performed. Traditionally woven textiles have come to be widely accepted as identity markers by citizens of the same country and across the diaspora. However, one must also pay

56 Holland, Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds, 61.
attention to the possibility that inaccurate or inadequate contexts will be applied to these symbols or icons.

In Chapter Four I return to the idea of history, particularly the preservation of material history, and the necessity for cultural restitution to Africa. Molefi Kete Asante, African history professor and philosopher, believes that the project of culture demands interrogating the past from an Afrocentric perspective.57 “We must not be stuck in the past, but we must not forget the past; we must use it as a resource to ensure civic commitment and to build our civil society.”58 Doing so means having access to the physical remnants of the past, to reclaim authentic historical objects.

Something that I noticed that was common in all discussions about traditional textiles was the question of authenticity. In The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1935) Walter Benjamin famously theorized that mechanical production devalues the uniqueness (aura) of an artwork. Benjamin offers insight into understanding how technology contributes to the de-valuation of artwork in modernity. The authentic that Benjamin refers to when he talks about aura, is not applicable as textiles are meant to be reproduced. Instead of then being based on ritual, the textile becomes underpinned by politics.59 However, the reproductive quality of textiles does not “remove the thing reproduced from the realm of tradition.”60

58 Asante, “Afrocentricity and the Argument for Civic Commitment”, 126.
60 Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 12.
a thing refers to everything about the product that is transmissible from its creation, that is from its material duration to the history it has experienced.61

These textiles have a presence beyond their specific ethnic groups and countries and have been adopted by most Africans and those associated to the African diaspora. This attests to the fact that there are certain shared experiences amongst the African community and these textiles help people find a history and a connection to their heritage. Pre-colonial and post-colonial African fabrics exist side by side in constant conversation with African identity. Both have come to be seen as valid expressions of being African, because for them it is not about the origins of the fabric but the cultural significance that is ascribed to different forms of representation at different points in time. It is my hope that people start to recognize that there is some beauty, memory, and importance within these cloths. By investigating textiles in the broad context of material culture I prove that cultures need to learn from their past to build a solid foundation for the future.

In my conclusion I make an argument for the restitution of African cultural artefacts as a means of returning an authentic past to a continent overwritten by colonial histories. I believe that the repatriation of artefacts and artworks is particularly important for the development of one’s national identity. Based on what I have observed and experienced personally, the lack of interaction between people and historical artefacts and objects causes a decline in development of one’s national identity. In November 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso in which he advocated for the return of African artworks and artifacts from French museums to their respective countries of origin.

61 Ibid., 11.
This address by President Macron led to the report on the *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics* (2018) written by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy. This report was meant to offer guidelines for the implementation of the effective restitution of African artworks. The report demands a rethinking and reappraisal of the African art and its current place within Western Museums. Sarr and Savoy see restitution as a necessary process for progress to take place. The development of the African youth is hindered due to the loss of their artistic and cultural heritage. These objects that were taken from their home countries are extremely powerful in ensuring that an understanding of national identity is reached. Whenever repatriation is being discussed it often deals with the fact that the objects were taken from their original locations due to events like colonialism and war. The return of these objects may heal the trauma of the past. What this debate never seems to address is the need for repatriation. Why are these countries asking for these objects back apart from the fact that it once belonged to them? The current debates and schools of thought only seem to scratch the surface. Folarin Shyllon documents the actions of the Benin Dialogue Group on their quest to get the Benin Bronzes taken from the Benin Kingdom during the Benin Expedition. Shyllon documents the meetings that take place and expresses his thoughts and criticisms on the outcomes of these meetings.

Having both Shyllon’s writings as well as the report by Savoy and Sarr, written at the request of Macron, enables me to compare the different ways different countries in possession of the Benin Bronzes are going about addressing this escalating need to have artefacts that were stolen be returned. Like Shyllon mentioned in *BENIN DIALOGUE GROUP: Benin Royal*

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*Museum--Three Steps Forward, Six Steps Back* we see that France has always been receptive to these acts of restitution. In *Who Owns Antiquity?: Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage*, James Cuno argued that antiquities are the cultural property of humankind, not of the countries that lay exclusive claim to them. In *Whose Culture?*, by James Cuno, leading figures from universities and museums in the United States and Britain argue that modern nation-states have at best a dubious connection with the ancient cultures they claim to represent, and that archaeology has been misused by nationalistic identity politics. They explain why exhibition is essential to responsible acquisitions, why our shared art heritage trumps nationalist agendas, why restrictive cultural property laws put antiquities at risk from unstable governments. They do not emphasize the importance repatriating these objects will have on the community and society.

In *The Art of (Re)Possession: Heritage and The Cultural Politics of Congo’s Decolonization* (2015), Sarah Van Beurden debates the importance of cultural heritage and cultural restitution as necessary aspects of Congolese interpretations of decolonization and explores how cultural sovereignty was constructed in postcolonial Zaire. *The Art of (Re)Possession* helps to cement the theory that restitution is important for development and growth to occur. In *Iconoclasms in Africa: Implications for the Debate on Restitution of Cultural Heritage*, Z. S. Strother offers the opportunity to hear the voices of African stakeholders in restitution who will help determine the role of the images in their societies especially if the works are returned. By the end of this paper, I will prove that a well-organized restitution is also essential for the establishment of a national identity, by making a necessary pact with contemporary art production. In *Spirit and Matter: The Materiality of Mozambican Prophet Healing*, Tracy, Luedke discusses Rosalind Shaw’s differentiations between discursive memory and practical memory. Discursive memory relates to the “explicit, intentional narrative accounts
of the past” whereas practical memory relates to memories that are “forgotten as history” because they live on through habits, social practices, ritual processes and embodied experiences. I am advocating for an environment where practical memory can occur.
Chapter One

History of Kente Cloth and Ghanian Identity

Kente is a cloth with a long history. The creation of the Kente cloth begins with cotton. In the past the raw cotton was either imported or woven locally, whereas now most weavers buy commercially produced thread in cotton, rayon, Lurex, or, more rarely silk.63 The first step in this weaving process involves the preparation of the thread. Young male apprentices as young as five usually transfer the thread off of the skein winder onto bobbins (fig. 1).

Figure 1: Personal Photograph by Author, Untitled, Skein winder and Kente warp threads, 2022, photograph, Ghana

Enough warp is then laid for as many as twenty-four strips in a man’s cloth. Both the Asante and Ewe weavers use the horizontal narrow-band treadle loom, the loom that is found

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throughout most of West Africa. A “weaver’s cross” is created in order to establish the desired stripe pattern. Most of the bands of cloth created by Asante and Ewe weavers are between 7.5 and 11.5 cm wide.

![Figure 2: Personal Photograph by Author, Untitled, Woven kente band, 2022, photograph, Ghana](image)

The woven strips “are cut at fixed intervals and sewn together selvage to selvage to create a larger piece of cloth.”

Ross believes that the first woven strips were plain and made from simple undyed cotton and indigo-dyed warp stripes with simple weft designs. The introduction of dyed cotton

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64 Ross, “The Loom and Weaving Technology, 78.
and silk led to new complex patterns, “evolving into the mix of solid color bands of weft stripes known today as Babadua. Most strips are identified by their warp-stripe pattern. Many of the cloths are named after important chiefs or queen mothers and some are even associated with historical events. Others are named after plants or animals or natural phenomena. The cloth is said to resemble a woven basket and the colors of the cloth are chosen according to the message or story the cloth is meant to portray. The geometric patterns that are woven into the cloth each have names and meanings and these cloths serve as a mode of non-verbal communication. This is because colours are of symbolic importance and depending on the occasion the colours are chosen in accordance. Historically, Kente was worn as royal regalia and symbolized wealth, power, and identity. Over time, the manufacture and use of woven Kente evolved to become accepted dress for wealthy non-royals who could afford it, to wear as a wrapped cloth or sewn garment.

El Anatsui is a Ghanaian sculptor living in Nigeria. He received his degree in visual arts in 1969 from the College of Art University of Science and Technology in Ghana. In the 1980s, El Anatsui began to show his work in the United Kingdom. His philosophy as a sculptor is to use whatever the environment provides him with. He was interested in objects that had a connection to, and interactions with, the human hand. His most prominent works are the textile-like wall-hangings he makes from flattened bottle caps and copper wires that holds them together. These

65 Ibid.
69 Halls and Martino, “Cloth, Copyright, and Cultural Exchange”, 236.
works were the reason Anatsui became a frequent feature in art magazines and reviews, after he first exhibited them at the 2007 Venice Biennale (fig 3).

Figure 3: El Anatsui, Dusasa II, 2007, Aluminium (liquor bottle caps) and copper wire, Metal; Wall hanging

The colors of the caps resemble Kente cloth. His work is largely coveted by the art community, academics, critics, museums and galleries. His shows are sold-out, and he has received commissions from foundations, corporate collections and museums. El Anatsui may have unconsciously begun to make Kente-like sculptures, as both his father and brother are weavers. As a Ghanaian, El Anatsui most likely understands the importance of Kente to the Ghanaian people. His sculptures have added to the appeal of the textile and found a place in the fine art world. El Anatsui was born during the colonial era in Ghana and grew up in post-

70Binder, "El Anatsui: Transformations."
independent Ghana and his art-school education was based on the British curriculum. El Anatsui reflects on his school experience: “I recall that in my final year Professor Michael McCleod came from that college to examine us. What this meant was that my schooling was steeped in the English art school tradition. We weren’t exposed much to our own artistic antecedents, and toward the end of my course, a certain number of us decided that it was time we learned about our own art traditions.” El Anatsui understood the need for an identity. He grew up in a time where Ghanaians were getting used to being Ghanaians again. He experienced the changes the country went through and that is reflected in all the artworks he produces. El Anatsui opens the discussion about the effects of colonialism on Africa and the current state of post-colonial Africa. By using a textile that is deeply rooted in who the Ghanaians are as people, El Anatsui manages to tell stories and initiate discussions about the people and their status.

Africa was said to have no writing traditions, but Ghana had a text-based form of communication through Adinkra, a traditional method of printing on cloth using a fixed set of symbols. Adinkra generally translates to saying goodbye or bidding farewell. Adinkra symbols and patterns on the textiles hold a code that “carry, preserve, and present aspects of beliefs, history, social values, cultural norms, social and political organization, and philosophy of the Akan.” Adinkra consists of a set of about 69 unique adinkra symbols that originated from the Akan peoples. These symbols consists of lines, circles and other shapes that resemble real life

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73 G.F Kojo Arthur, Cloth as Metaphor: (Re)Reading the Adinkra Cloth Symbols of the Akan of Ghana, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2017), 12.
75 The number of Adinkra symbols varies across various sources. Paul Adjei has identified over 500. I have personally seen a folder with over 60 symbols at an Adinkra symbol printers’ workshop in Ntonso, Kumasi Ghana.
objects associated with the Akan culture. Each symbol has a name and meaning. These symbols are visual representations of the Akan proverbs, values and rules of conduct. The knowledge and use of Adinkra symbols has now gone beyond its exclusive use by the Akan and has now become recognized and used across Ghana. Adinkra stamped cloths are some of the earliest examples of textile art documented in all of West Africa. The colors and symbols of the adinkra cloth address concepts “that relate to social and political organization, beliefs and attitudes, complex moral and ethical issues about the self and one’s responsibilities, and knowledge and education.” If the Adinkra symbols are not understood, the communicative properties of the symbols become ineffective, and the symbols become decorative tools. The universal understanding of the adinkra text attests to the presence of a collective memory of the people, be it the Akans or Ghanaian citizens. The adinkra cloth (fig. 6) is made using the block-print technique where these use carved design blocks (adwini nnua) (fig 4), a broad stick (daban), and a comb like tool (nsensan nnua) and printed on locally woven cloth produced from locally grown and hand-spun cotton. Some adinkra cloths are also screen-printed which reduces the production time and enhances the designing and incorporation of more symbols.

76 Ibid., 255-256.
77 Ibid., 259.
78 Arthur, Cloth as Metaphor”, 19.
79 Ibid.,32.
80 Ibid., 35.
Figure 4: Personal Photograph by Author, A collection of carved design blocks (*adwini nnua*), 2022, photograph, Ghana

Figure 5: Personal Photograph by Author, A close-up of a Gye Nyame carved design block, 2022, photograph, Ghana
Figure 6: Personal Photograph by Author, Printed Adinkra cloths, 2022, photograph, Ghana

Figure 7: Personal Photograph by Author Printed Gye Nyame symbol, 2022, photograph, Ghana
The adinkra symbols continue to change as new influences like technological advancements impact the Akan and Ghanaian culture. There are now machine-printed adinkra cloths being produced by Ghanaians, British, Dutch, Japanese and French textile companies.\(^{81}\) Some indigenous cloth producers are stamping commercial wax print cloth, which results in “fancy” adinkra cloth. The criteria for choosing names for the wax prints are based in popular culture, issues trending at the time, or momentous socio-political events.\(^{82}\)

Many Adinkra stamps depict commonplace objects that have been given symbolic value applied to everyday experience or royal statement. Newly carved stamps comment upon political events of the past and present while others are created to serve a more fashionable trade with the growing social (non-funerary) wearing of adinkra cloths (known as kwasidae or Sunday cloths). This addition of new stamps to the "symbol pool" and the increasing use of adinkra cloths for purely social occasions reflects the elasticity and resilience of Akan art and culture in its ability to meet the changing contemporary world while drawing upon a heritage of tradition. Adinkra cloth and symbols also promote the idea of unity and identity. With its introduction into the world of fashion, members of the abusua (matrilineage) often wear a common symbol or motif, often sewn in a similar style of dress to show familial alliance.\(^{83}\) Mato notes that although there is an increase in popularity of the adinkra cloth, those who wear them have little to no knowledge about the symbols and the proverbs and sayings associated with them. The same can be said for the cloth stampers, many who are young men working part-time, who know little about the associated proverbs and must turn to the few elders for information.\(^{84}\) Mato believes that there

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\(^{81}\) Ibid.

\(^{82}\) Ibid.


\(^{84}\) Mato, “Clothed in Symbols: Wearing Proverbs.”
are positive aspects to the popularity of adinkra as individuals seek to wear cloths which are part of their heritage and thereby keep the tradition active in a new domain of appearance. The willingness of the Akan society to incorporate contemporary interpretations of adinkra symbols with the arts of the past speaks to their acceptance of the fact that for there to be an interest in heritage and tradition within the younger generation art forms must be created to suite their taste. Expanding on this traditional symbol set, Anatsui invented symbols of his own. For Anatsui, “the puncturing and burning of the wooden slats and the brutal marks made with a chainsaw refer to the history of Africa and most specifically to the 1884 Berlin Conference, when colonial powers divided the African continent. ‘I thought of tearing things into bits and pieces.’”

El Anatsui uses liquor bottle caps for his wall hanging sculptures because of their malleability and their resistance to rust although his use of liquor bottle caps has also been connected with alcohol trade in West Africa. El Anatsui examines the presence of alcohol in Africa. “These alcoholic drinks came to Africa, brought by European explorers or traders long ago, ostensibly to serve as items for barter or trade, which was what they were used for initially. But then, as time went on, we saw that the drinks happened to be one of the items that made the rounds in the transatlantic trade. You know, rum from Cuba or the Americas to Europe and then back.” His work is reminiscent of strip-woven cloth produced primarily in Ghana, which is woven primarily by men. It has been mentioned that his father and brother both wove Ewe Kente. The colors that are found on El Anatsui’s sculptures are those that are commonly found on Kente: yellow, red, purple, black, green, and orange. Anatsui did not consciously have Kente

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87 Enwezor, “Cartographies of Uneven Exchange”, 104.
on his mind until he began the process of linking the caps. Kente has been a constant presence in
the life of El Anatsui and as such it has become a part of his personal memories. The colors have
had a constant presence in his life and even if he did not consciously choose to do so, the
meanings that the colors and cloth has had in his life from the past to the present were bound to
come out as the messages behind his work are in some ways tied to the importance of the cloth
and its colors.

To understand El Anatsui’s textile sculptures one needs to know the history of Ghana and
the Kente cloth and its importance to the people and the nation. Kente is one of Africa’s most
surviving relics. It is a strip-woven cloth, made by the Asante people of Ghana and Ewe people
of Ghana and Togo. It is now often worn for special occasions like weddings, festivals, naming
ceremonies, funerals, and other important events. It has also gained international recognition and
has now found a permanent place outside of Ghana, most especially in the United States within
the African American community, where it has been used for garments as well as worn as stoles
or placed on academic robes. Its international presence has diluted and overshadowed its roles in
the Asante and Ewe cultures. Kente patterns have become commercialized appearing on articles
of clothing like hats, bags, and other accessories. Kente has now become a symbol for those who
want to identify as African or a minority. Doran Ross claims that “kente has come to evoke and
to celebrate a shared cultural heritage, bridging two continents.”

Ross attributes this popularity to the well documented history of the Asante as well as the Asante
gold. The authentic Kente is also very special and most often an indicator of wealth or class.

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Kente is a mainly cotton cloth, made from cotton that is grown and processed into colorful yarns locally in Ghana. Kente weaving is said to have begun in Bonwire (the legendary and “official” home of Asante Kente weaving) after two brothers observed Kwaku Ananse, the spider, weaving his web for two days. This cloth commonly comes in blues, greens and yellow.

In Bowdich’s book, he states that the weavers sometimes incorporated imported silk into luxury Kente cloth. Before there was no open market for the cloth so it was made when an order was placed. The designs found on the cloth were created with traditional meanings. Similar cloths can be found in ethnic societies in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The name Kente is probably derived from the Akan word *kenten* which means a basket. It should also be mentioned that the Ewe’s also have their own form of Kente which has distinctive differences. The Ewe’s pay more

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attention to the motifs on the cloth. Before the Asante kingdom fell to the British Empire in 1896, professionals and artisans, such as goldsmiths, woodcarvers and Kente weavers were restricted to making the products for the Asantehene. After the fall of the Asantes to the British Empire, they gained the freedom to produce any design or pattern to anyone they chose as long the buyer could afford the market price of the cloth.\textsuperscript{92}

During the period of 1896 to 1924, the number of Kente styles increased as well as the number of people that wore it, this included people from every social class.\textsuperscript{93} This period also saw an increase in imported goods. Regarding clothing, improved textiles from Holland, Britain, France, China, and readymade clothing from Sweden, Switzerland and Spain become abundant in the Gold Coast.\textsuperscript{94} Kente was no longer the only luxury cloth. The newly emerged middle-class and the children of the neo-enlightened bourgeoisies were wearing three-piece suits to look like the Europeans. The use of Kente as a symbolic cloth for leaders and aristocrats spread amongst other chiefs outside the Asante’s, although this was mainly within the Akan traditional area and worn also for festivals.\textsuperscript{95} The British were successful in erasing local culture: the King and the educated public wore three piece suits, spoke English, drunk tea, smoked cigarettes, danced the waltz and fox-trot and worshipped “their” God.\textsuperscript{96} When King Nana Osei Agyemang Prempeh II was sworn in as King, he reintroduced the traditional ceremonial days that had been abolished for over thirty years. This was his first duty as King, as he understood the need to blend and maintain two cultures. He brought all the traditional chiefs under his supervision and formed the Confederation of Asante Chiefs in 1934. This was primarily to reinstate ethnic culture and to

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 31.
present a political force for the Asante people. A meeting of the Asante chiefs turned into a fashion show, where the latest and most beautiful Kente patterns and designs were put on display and still occurs today, exemplified in 2022 by the fifth anniversary enstoolment of the Asantehemaa (fig. 9).

The colonial period inevitably brought about the disrespect of some African traditional customs. Imitations of the rare royal Kente patterns were seen all over. Some patterns that were solely for traditional functions or certain clans were used indiscriminately and unceremoniously. This is a practice that seems to have carried on to the current generation. This could be attributed to the fact that apart from the weavers who truly understand the art of

Figure 9: Personal Photograph by Author Kente Cloth worn as a wrap by women at the 5th anniversary of the Asantehemaa’s enstoolment, 2022, photograph, Ghana

97 Ibid., 33.
98 Ibid., 34.
99 Ibid, 35.
Kente and its patterns and the people who have learnt the names and meanings of these patterns, there is no system or avenue for people (the general public) to learn and understand what these patterns mean.

According to Asamoah-Yaw’s research, the 1940’s and 1950’s showed a decrease in the use of the Kente cloth. There was a focus on national politics rather than tribal politics. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana was seen as playing both sides. Nkrumah’s government learnt from and exemplified several foreign cultures such as that of the British, the Soviets, Balkans, Germans and Americans. At the same time, he tried to resurrect local cultures by attending official functions in Batakari or Kente cloth, although he was born in Nzema which is nowhere near Asante or Ewe weaving centers. He could have been attracted to the patterns of the cloth, maybe he wanted to make a fashion statement, but this proves that interest in the cloth grew past local patronage. By wearing these cloths, Nkrumah gave them both national and global recognition. Ross credits Kwame Nkrumah with the visibility of Kente globally. “Nkrumah carefully exploited…the Ghanaian love of the external symbols of collective and individual identification.”

Internationally he was seen as a true African, but locally he was despised by chiefs who saw him as trying to wipe out the local cultures. Kwame Nkrumah’s political party, the C.P.P, was trying to transform Ghana into a unified modern state, but Asamoah-Yaw reflects and sees it [what?] as them copying blindly or erroneously by deleting vital local cultural heritage. Asamoah-Yaw believes that the local cultures were needed as a primary base for any new development to be built upon. Another interpretation of Nkrumah’s actions can be seen in

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101 Ross, “Kente and Its Image Outside of Ghana,”, 166.
102 Ibid.
103 Asamoah-Yaw and Safo-Kantanka, Kente Cloth, 38.
G.P Hagan’s arguments. According to Hagan, Nkrumah was unable to reject the European way of dress, as he realized that rejecting any aspect of world culture will hinder progress and development. Nkrumah believed that by placing African culture side by side with European culture (dress), Ghanaian culture will be seen as part of world culture. It also “made it easier for Ghanaians to see their culture as a composite culture of diverse ethnic cultures. Ghanaian culture can be projected through the display of aspects of any of the ethnic cultures within the boundaries of Ghana. And Nkrumah showed how.”

Nkrumah took a part of the Asante history and culture; one which may have encompassed how he thought of Ghanaian culture and how he wanted the country to be represented. Based on its previous and current usages, the cloth projected an aura of royalty and greatness. By choosing something that was nationally recognized by all Ghanaians, Nkrumah had pushed Kente towards being a national cloth. The abundance of colors and patterns of the cloth gave an image of wealth and pride, attributes that Ghanaians would have recognized and understood. “Nkrumah made the fugu (smock) of the North national in appeal. The fugu was his battle dress, as it was for some leaders in the olden days. And he put on Kente for formal ceremonies. In so doing, he used elements of cultural attire to show that customs from different ethnic cultures were merely different aspects or manifestations of one cultural identity, the Ghanaian identity.”

Tourism in Ghana in the 1960’s and 1970’s promoted Asante weaving as well. Kumasi was considered a necessary destination during one’s visit. There have even been Kente festivals organized to promote the industry at local and international levels. This shows that locals recognize the popularity of the Kente cloth and the many possibilities the cloth has in advancing

104 Ross, “Kente and Its Image Outside of Ghana”, 166.
105 Ibid.
The pride that the Asantes feel towards the Kente industry is evident in the fight for which town is the center for Asante weaving. Bonwire even proposed opening a “museum and craft (Kente) production centre to capture its share to tourist dollars,” an idea that should be seriously considered. When Ghana was still the Gold Coast, most Ashanti families considered the Kente cloth to be almost like an heirloom. It was and still is worn for important occasions. It has and will always be a treasured cloth that will be passed on for generations to come. Asamoah-yaw is worried about the recent changes to the patterns and designs that have been taking place within the Kente industry. His hope is that consumers will continue to demand classic patterns in the hope that its history, images and traditions will persevere. Based on the mentioned history above, we see that Kente has become the identifier and symbol of Ghana. Records of traditional marriages in the past did not make mention of the wearing of Kente during the ritual activities, but as time went on and Western practices become a part of the Ghanaian culture, and Christian weddings were introduced. Kente became the appropriate attire for the bride and groom during the traditional weddings.

The wearing of Kente in college graduation ceremonies was most prominently seen when in 1963 W.E. Du Bois and members of the faculty at the University of Ghana were photographed at the presentation of an honorary degree for the American scholar (fig. 10).

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107 Ibid.
108 Asamoah-Yaw and Safo-Kantanka, Kente Cloth, 40.
This practice carried on, and today, the practice extends to all educational levels in Ghana and at the end of the school year graduates are seen in Kente.\textsuperscript{110} From the multiple uses of Kente around the country we can see that it is a multifunctional textile that the country has embraced. It is now more than a textile for personal adornment, it has now become a symbol of tradition. I focus on Kente in this chapter because it the most familiar and the most popular textile of Ghana. That does not mean that there are not others that could compete for the attention it receives. There are several other ethnic cloths that draw one’s attention and have the same role that Kente does, such as the batakari (fugu), adinkra cloths and batik. It just goes to show that textiles play

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\textsuperscript{110} Ross, “A Beautiful Does Not Wear Itself,” 54.
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an important role in the nation’s history and development. They carry a lot of information about each ethnic group and the identity of the people they represent.

According to Samuel Cophie, the Kente that some weavers are producing are inferior. He believes that increase in demand affects the quality of the product. He states that some weavers use Lurex in cheaper cloths. The weavers focus more on the speed of finishing the cloth rather than the labour-intensive work of the past. According to Cophie, in the past, a cloth may take up to six months to complete.\textsuperscript{111} A museum will ensure that the history of the Kente does not die. It ensures that there is a place where people can go to appreciate the growth and importance of this cloth to the Asante people and the people of Ghana. These days there are machine produced Kente. A phenomenon that the Asante and Ewe weavers view as industrial appropriation and a copyright infringement. These cloths are not produced in Ghana, they are rather woven in other African countries like Senegal, Benin, Togo and the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{112} These cloths are thinner than the strip-woven ones, and as such are easier to cut, sew and style. This makes them very popular outside the Asante and Ewe heartlands. Kente is also given as a meaningful gift. Kente was first given as a gift to the United Nations in 1960 and was replaced to commemorate the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the U.N. in 2017 (fig. 11). The cloth is composed of different traditional designs meant to represent the forging of a common unity of purpose, and the necessity to build consensus. It symbolizes the spirit of diversity and common purpose.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{112} Ross, “Introduction: Fine Weaves and Tangled Webs,” 27.
Figure 11: Andrew Asare, United Nations Kente gift Kente Wall Hanging: One Head Cannot Go Into Council, original 1960, replacement 2017, photograph, United Nations Conference Building
Textiles offer the wearer the opportunity to build or create themselves or an image of themselves, of who they are or who they want to be. This could be with regards to their relationship to family, community, society, and nation. In order to achieve this, the process of creating a textile or dress, involving some additions, subtractions and then stitching, is the result of self-examination towards the production of an identity in cloth. Trying to find one’s identity is about understanding who you want to be and how to achieve that, whether by cutting away things that do not work with your world view or adding things that make you more comfortable with who are and who you want to be. Like the Kente weavers, El Anatsui is stitching together fragments, working with things left behind by the Europeans after their colonial rule was over. Kente could be viewed as a reference to what was, what could have been, and what could be. It is also referencing what is yet to come. Kente is also a reflection of the changes that occurred in the country after colonial rule. According to El Anatsui “working with bottle caps makes me feel like I’m using a medium which was there at a particular time in history, when the contact between the three continents started. Also, my process of joining — making sure that the joining is such that you don’t have a fixed form — could allude to the fact of the ambivalent, unsure relationships between the continents even up till today.”  

El Anatsui’s work reflects the journey of Kente as well. Kente is a textile that has been in Ghana’s history since the very beginning, and it has experienced and documented the changes that the country and its citizens have gone through over time. The change in its demand is a record of the contact and relationship that the country had with the Europeans. It is almost perfect that El Anatsui chooses to use bottle-caps to create textile-like sculptures to highlight the relationship between the continents as textiles are one of the few artefacts that have stood the test of time and journeyed with the country through the world.

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114 Enwezor, “Cartographies of Uneven Exchange”, 104.
all its successes and failures. These textiles have meanings that have travelled over time because they are still held in high regard and with importance and they are still treated as heirlooms and passed on from generation to generation. However, as time goes on these people especially the middleman, in Europe and America, have taken these textiles and turned them into something completely different. This is not meant as a reprimand towards the individuals who wear the commercialized and commodified versions of these textiles. The middleman has watered down the meaning behind these textiles and as such, the current generation of consumers are not motivated to understand the importance these textiles hold or their origins. To them the textiles have become open ended interpretations of identity and culture. Specifically, for a textile like Kente whose long and important history has been well documented overtime, it is very difficult for me as a Ghanaian so see the current trend that exists with this textile. Growing up, Kente has always been reserved for special occasions and not the everyday wear we see today. Someone like Kwame Nkrumah had the right idea in how he used the textiles of his country and that is a mindset we need to adopt. It is a beautiful sentiment to have the Kente cloth of the Asante to represent a national and global cause, but the way it has been adopted now seems to demean the work and thought that went into the creation of this textile. Although African Americans have adopted this textile into the quest for an identity and unity, I would like there to to focus on the use of textiles in its home country and how it can be improved before addressing the outside worlds use of it.

In an interview with Laura James, El Anatsui notes that the mediums he usually works with have to do with food and consumption. The first medium El Anatsui worked with was the serving tray, with which produced a series of works in the early 1970s (fig. 12).
In the late 1970s, he worked with pots (fig. 13). However, rather than focus on the pot’s association with food and water, El Anatsui focused on the fragility, the breaking and the dilapidation of these objects.\textsuperscript{115} For El Anatsui, the pot’s life did not end when it was broken, it only transformed. When the pot’s original function is ended it obtains several new uses, from the mundane and every day to the spiritual. What most intrigued him was the use of broken pots as preferred containers for presenting offerings to the ancestors. He worked with this idea to “explore the innate property of clay and the pot- the breaking, fragility, decay- as a condition for new growth, rebirth.”\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
This is an interesting concept to have, focusing on the next life of a disposed object. This belief of an object finding a new purpose, a rebirth, is a useful metaphor for postcolonial nations. Rather than being broken and staying broken, these countries pick themselves up and find a way to survive the traumatic experiences at the hands of the colonial oppressors. Human beings, like the pots, found a way to keep on going. They found ways to circumvent the degradation they experienced. Rather than accept the European notions of who they were, they found ways to pull themselves up and build a nation for themselves. Anatsui’s employment of already used products is a way to effect transformation. These bottle-caps used to represent a brand of drink but now they are no longer going to serve the role of identifying these drinks but rather serve as sources of reflection. This is because although they are removed from the functional context, they bring their histories and identities with them in their new environments.\footnote{Ibid., 42.} This is a similar concept to
the way the African objects that are found in museums outside of their native home function. These objects were taken from their original contexts and placed within environments where their meanings and histories were erased, and they were only kept for their aesthetic purposes. El Anatsui is doing the same thing, but rather than erasing their histories he keeps them in order to get people to think. This is the same for the Kente cloth. Once they stopped being the exclusive textile for the Asantehenes, their meanings were transformed. They became the cloth that represented the Ghanaian nation and its citizens. The cloth still held on to its history of being associated with wealth and royalty and that meaning transformed and translated to the entire nation. It started to represent how the citizens wanted to see themselves and how they felt that they should be seen by other nations.

For El Anatsui, his works seek to create a new normal. A world where art can bring together the past and the present in a way that does not erase the colonial past, but rather acknowledges it and seeks to build an African nation that can reflect on its past and rise above it. Rather than focus on the impact that colonial rule had on the African continent, Anatsui works are geared towards helping the current African nations grow and become new again. The Bleeding Takari II (fig. 14) could be seen as a reference to violence but could also focus on the nature of blood and its association with regeneration and childbirth.
El Anatsui projects a positive image of not dwelling in the past, but rather acknowledging the past happened and that a nation can look back on its past and realize that its people are stronger and have reinvented ourselves. His works remind Africans that they are no longer under colonial rule, and they do not need to fear the Western powers anymore. It gives Africans the opportunity to transform and Kente is part of this transformation. It became the symbol of nationalism and identity and it helped create a new perspective of who Ghanaians are as a people after colonialism ended, a people with history and dignity. As mentioned before, the demand for Kente died down, but with Kwame Nkrumah using Kente as his formal uniform, especially at a time when European dress had become the norm, Kente began to be seen as a textile that was important to the nation. Nkrumah repurposed the cloth to be more than just for Kings, he made the Kente cloth a symbol of pride and identity.
El Anatsui’s works have gained prominence outside of the African continent. This can be said to be due to the ability for his works to embody so many different meanings. His works are not strictly “African,” although his installations may look like or represent different ethnic groups’ traditional cloth. His “cloths” offer a mirror that allows his viewers to reflect on life and history. This, in addition to the sheer vastness of his pieces, makes El Anatsui an exciting artist to follow.

One thing that adds to the loss of culture is the fact that, although there is a demand for and an interest in African culture, that does not mean that people are seeking to quench this thirst with authentic products from Africa. “As a result, the African American market is open not just to the most authentic products, but also to the most easily available and in the case of African textiles, those are often imitations.”

The Kente cloth has become more than just an ethnic cloth. We could categorize it as a national cloth as it is being worn by any and everybody who can afford it. Since we cannot ignore its global presence, it should be mentioned that there are now two different types of Kente cloths on the market, the strip-woven cloth and the machine-made cloth. The strip-woven cloth, which is and should be characterized as the authentic Kente cloth, is more expensive than the machine made one. This means that Kente is accessible to any and everyone who wants to own it. But since the strip-woven characteristic of the cloth adds to the importance, quality and meaning of the cloth, then it begs the question what do these machine-made cloths say about authenticity and one’s identity? Especially if the identity is tied to the characteristics that are being changed? The machine-made cloths do not hold the same appeal and history that the strip-

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woven cloths do. The history lies in the strip-woven cloth and if Adinkra and Kente cloths continue to be produced, they will continue to act as markers of dignity, grief, celebration, and wealth in the lives of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. In Bonwire, Boatema Boateng saw imitation Kente knick-knacks in one weaver’s store sitting above authentic woven cloth. While he disapproved of the imitations, his could not to avoid them completely as he recognized that he was selling to a varied market that included people who would focus on the woven cloth and ignore the fake Kente, as well as those who, unable to afford anything in the expensive authentic woven cloth, would prefer to buy a fake Kente coin purse. Boateng also found out that the weaver kept his best cloth locked away. \textsuperscript{119} It could be argued that these machine-made cloths dilute the meaning and importance that is placed on the strip-woven cloth. It negates the hard work that the weavers put into their work and the pride they have for their products. What it also does is take a history and commercialize it and this in turn dilutes the history. It makes it a commodity. The Kente cloth is a part of Ghana’s visual identity. The heaviness and texture of the textile is part of what Kente is. This resonates with the nation and its citizens. I do not feel the same connection to the machine woven cloths that I feel to the strip-woven cloths, and I think that is an important distinction to take note of.

A textile like Kente embodies the history of not just the ethnic group, the Asantes, but also the country, especially during the colonial period and after the colonial period. As we see, this textile’s beauty and intricacies and maybe its meaning, was sought out by everyone and not just the Asantes. This pride caused the textile to graduate from being just a cloth for the Asantehene and become a cloth for the nation. The textile holds a cultural memory. Although the history of the Kente cloth or its importance is not taught or necessarily passed down, based off

\textsuperscript{119}\textit{Ibid.}, 8-9.
how and when it is worn and treated, one realizes that the cloth holds a special place in the wearer’s life. This importance is seen in the fact that the cloth is considered an heirloom and passed on from generation to generation. Andrew explains that “viewer interpretations of textiles and the context in which they are used or viewed, are informed by both individual memory and shared cultural memory, which act as triggers for the generation of shared perceptions that in semiotic terms reveal dominant cultural codes of meaning.”\textsuperscript{120} As a Ghanaian child growing up in this current generation, we are only able to see directly the importance this cloth has through our parents and family members, and through their actions. We see how Kente is treated and revered by wearers. “The meanings we derive from textiles are learnt from an early age and their meanings become culturally embedded.”\textsuperscript{121}

The Ghanaian clothing history has changed over time. The Europeans imposed their clothing styles on us, and Ghanaians have continued along that path as time goes on. Their identity became ours. The way Ghanaians have dressed during the post-colonial era reflects the fact that they have been influenced by the Western way of dress and culture. This has led to a decline in the usage and appreciation of traditional woven cloths and African culture “our fundamental responses to many textiles are culturally learned, creating a hierarchy of meanings associated with each fabric.”\textsuperscript{122} For example, the way Nkrumah and his cabinet, and the Asante Kings wore Kente, showcased the high regard in which the cloth was held. We learn from our leaders, and we see that these people wear the cloth when they want to represent their African side. This leads the audience and those on the outside to start to question what this textile means. As it is continued to be worn, people start to want to replicate and copy those who wear this.

\textsuperscript{120} Andrew, “Textile Semantics,” 187.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid
They start to realize its appeal and importance. They wear the Kente to be traditional and grown-up. They wear it to formal events, and they wear it because it shows that they are Ghanaian and African. The current use of Kente can be considered a post-colonial reflection on identity and culture.

People want to belong hence they go for what they can afford. This just adds meaning to the fact that the cloth holds an important place in the lives of their Ghanaian owners. Kente is also about making a fashion statement. This in turn relates to one’s identity. To be seen wearing original woven Kente, one has a sense of pride and dignity because, they are wearing something of value. They are wearing a cloth that represents something to them and holds a lot of meaning to their identity.

Textiles, a part of material culture, have persisted through the long growth of nation. They carry the histories and stories of a specific ethnic group and, in this case, a country. They are imbued with and embedded in tradition. They are involved in every aspect a nation’s growth and development. Their histories tell a story of how the people or citizens saw themselves and how they wanted to be seen.
Chapter Two

Eddy Kamuanga Illunga, African Wax Prints and the Kuba Cloth

The work of contemporary artist Eddy Kamuanga Illunga, set in the post-colonial Democratic Republic of Congo, offers essential insights into the dissonance between the past and the present in Congolese culture, and on a greater scale African culture. As a contemporary Congolese citizen, Kamuanga Illunga’s paintings offer a platform for examining the tensions between traditional and contemporary textiles, not only through traditional patterns but also through the materiality of their production. In this chapter, I examine the importance of traditional Kuba cloth, made from local raffia palm, as an indicator of African identity and Congolese nationalism, while also exploring cotton wax print Kuba cloths, a method introduced by Belgian colonizers of the region, as an alternative expression of post-colonial Congo. I demonstrate that while colonialism led to the material suppression of raffia, Kamuanga Illunga explores a new Congolese identity by using “African” wax print textiles. But while wax print textiles have become the dominant expression of contemporary Congolese identity as the bearers of traditional patterns, it is also true that the translation of traditional motifs into a different material expression (wax prints) can be interpreted as an act of suppression. In the colonial period, cotton was viewed as a luxury commodity, and cotton textiles were associated with Dutch imperialism and with the Atlantic slave trade. My argument is that using cotton as an expression of African identity is a continuous act of oppression.

Raffia palm is an abundant resource in Central Africa. Over the centuries, this plant has been utilized for many purposes. One of its main uses is for the weaving of textiles, the most popular of which is Kuba cloth. Raffia cloth is a vital part of Kuba identity and life. In this chapter, I examine how raffia cloth, as well as wax print cloths, are used in the creation of
Congolese identity. I demonstrate that wax prints, although “African” in nature, are not ideal in establishing a strong and effective national identity. However, traditional Kuba cloth, made of raffia, may be able to achieve this feat, to bridge tradition and modernity, in the forging of an enduring Congolese social identity. Kuba cloth is a part of the cultural heritage of the Kuba group of Congo, and the cloth holds a great deal of history, knowledge, and importance to the people.

In 1917, the colonial administration in Congo forced citizens to cultivate cotton two days per week, after numerous unsuccessful attempts to develop cotton production. However, there were still obstacles in their way of a successful enterprise. The colonial masters had not fully grasped the salient information needed to make cotton production a success, such as the ideal soil types, climate variations and rainfall patterns. Other obstacles included the lack of transportation, low population density and people’s opposition to a rigid labor regime.\textsuperscript{123} The colonial state justified the reintroduction of forced labor, which was abolished in 1910, with the First World War as well as with the need to reduce Belgium’s dependency on American and Indian cotton imports. The administration applied labor policies that turned most Africans “into migrants’ laborers or peasants, without allowing them to pursue other ways of making a living.”\textsuperscript{124} After 1912 and mostly from 1920 onward, local leaders also created customary laws that led to the “appropriation of unpaid labor for collective public work on the chiefs’ cotton plots.”\textsuperscript{125} The peasants worked throughout the year on the cotton fields. For northern peasants, December was apparently the only month they had off the fields. Yet they spent the month preparing for the

\textsuperscript{124} Likaka. \textit{Rural Society and Cotton in Colonial Zaire}. 27.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
harvest by making mats and baskets needed to transport cotton. Cotton cultivation had a severe effect on food and nutrition. In 1936, numerous cotton cultivators were reported to have been malnourished. Food supplies reduced as mandatory cotton cultivation expanded. Between 1917 and 1935, social control was a defining feature of the cotton economy. The colonial administrators believed that the threat and use of force was necessary to make peasants produce cotton instead of food. As late as 1945, the administrators’ reasoning was that if the peasants were preoccupied, they would not have time to think about their plight. By the 1920’s the state prohibited night dances and most rituals as they believed that rituals, religious activities, and large gatherings decreased productivity since the peasants’ energies were expended elsewhere other than the fields. After 1945, the argument was that cotton cultivation would allow Africans to become self-sufficient farmers who would benefit from rising standards of living.

Households that failed to produce enough cotton were subjected to retribution. The systems of control used justified using violence on those who willing or unwillingly failed to satisfy production requirements. In 1918, the state decreed “that failure to comply with the colonial law would result in a penalty of seven days of hard labor and a fine of 200 francs, this was replaced by a one-month sentence in 1942.” Cotton production created a legal basis for the repression of the Congolese people. Violence was used to further the day-to-day bureaucracy of economic exploitation. From 1936 until 1957, the colonial state introduced incentives, structural reforms, and propaganda, to create a new attitude towards cotton cultivation and convince them of the advantages of cotton.

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126 Ibid., 34
127 Ibid., 47.
128 Ibid., 48.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., 48-49.
131 Ibid., 57
In Kamuanga Ilunga’s *Fragile 2, Fragile 5* (fig.15) and *Fragile 6*, the male characters are seen wearing European wax print cloth in a loincloth style, held up by suspenders and accessorized with a fedora style hat. In *Fragile 5*, a young girl is seen wearing an outfit made entirely of Western style clothing.

![Figure 15: Eddy Kamuanga Illunga, Fragile 5, 2018, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 196 x 187 cm](image)

She grasps her head with her hands in a gesture of embarrassment or frustration as her parents try to make sense of a Western fabric. Kamuanga Ilunga is representing a period when wax print cloth was not the clothing choice of the people, and his depiction creates a diachronous conundrum. The subjects in *Fragile 6* (fig.16) and *Fragile 1* look at these new objects in wonder.
and confusion; the female subject is in a desperate and confused state as she is caught between two European objects.

![Figure 16: Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, Fragile 6, 2018, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 180 x 196 cm.](image)

However, the actual textiles that Kamuanga Ilunga employs do not coincide with that historical period. The way they are worn is historically consistent, but the textiles themselves are modern. This duality highlights the power struggle between tradition and modernity.
In *Fragile 1* (fig. 17) the woman also holds a plastic pail and is wearing plastic flip flops which are very common in modern-day Africa. This diachronic play adds confusion and despair to the viewer’s experience. By using multiple indicators of time, the audience is trapped in uncertainty. In terms of African history and tradition, European influence has created persistent confusion through time. In *Fragile 5* we see one of the females sitting on a drinks crate, probably a Coca-Cola crate. In *Duty of Memory*, she is holding a very modern handbag. In Kamuanga Ilunga’s Mangbentu series most of his characters are seen wearing what looks like Kanga cloth. What this shows is that wax print cloths have become a part of the culture in the Democratic
Republic of Congo, replacing and erasing the traditional cloths and clothing that existed before the colonial oppressors arrived. Rather than make use of the abundant raffia that existed in their country and had already been established as a cloth type for certain ethnic groups, they choose to use a cloth that was not truly theirs, a textile that had been created by outsiders.

The continuity between tradition and modern Kuba production is found in the patterns of the cloth, whether woven or printed. The patterns found in Kuba cloth belong to a design system called *buina*, where every pattern has its own name. These names are both specific and descriptive, but the patterns are not classified by their designs. Instead, the names represent the “functional quality of the designs as the cloth is worn and danced with, referring to the rhythm and movement of the patterns upon the skirt.”\(^{132}\) The patterns that are found on the cloth suggest the hierarchy of power, where the most elaborate and luxuriously decorated cloths are the most expensive and can only be obtained by titleholders in positions to wear them.\(^{133}\) Although patterns and motifs may not suggest status today, one can still deduce the amount of time taken to weave and decorate the cloth based on how elaborate the designs are, hence making the cloth more expensive.\(^{134}\) These same patterns and motifs are no longer indicators of social status but are all equally taken as ‘African.’

The kind of textiles that Kamuanga Ilunga uses in his work represents the present state of fashion, culture and textile production in the Democratic Republic of Congo. For example, the absence of traditional woven clothing in some of his works might signify general disinterest on the part of Congolese society in knowledge and appreciation of traditional Congolese textiles.

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\(^{133}\) Wilson, "Wrapped in Tradition, 8.

Traditional textiles might be seen as part of the colonizing agenda to characterize traditional African culture as pagan, backward and dangerous. Given that most of the nation is now devoutly Christian, these traditional textiles would not be readily accepted by the population. But the very presence of traditional textiles speaks to the yearning to have a connection to these indigenous cultures and heritage. Rather than returning to the “pagan” textiles, people turn to wax print cloth, which is dissociated from a ‘forbidden’ past. The younger generation now prefers to wear imported clothing: the women wear imported cloth for daily wear and the men prefer to wear Western-style trousers and shirts. Wearing plain, undecorated raffia cloth is now a habit of the older generation. However, some older Kuba men and women mimic the traditional style of skirts (fig. 18) by purchasing imported cotton cloth and machine hemming it in the same style as raffia skirts (fig. 19).\textsuperscript{135} This cloth, with its global presence, also makes it easier for the Congolese and Africans at large to have a global and more acceptable identity and presence.

\textsuperscript{135} Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, \textit{Cloth and Human Experience} (Smithsonian Institute Press: London, 1989), 123
Figure 18: Jan Vansina, Kuba-Bushong Dignitary, Female Relative of the King, photograph, 1953-1956
The raffia tree was very prominent and important to the Kuba people. According to Jan Vansina, three times a year all adolescents and adults needed two new costumes, containing about five standard lengths of raffia cloth each. The cloth was also made into velvet and embroidered lengths to be used at funerals or made into dancing costumes or exported.\textsuperscript{136} Over the course of the colonial period, the volume of required lengths of cloth diminished slowly over time because the demand for imported cloth grew quite slowly among the Kuba people: even as

\textsuperscript{136} Jan Vansina, \textit{Being Colonized: The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960} (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 123.
late as the 1950s at least two-thirds of all the cloth worn by them were raffia costumes.\textsuperscript{137} Although raffia was an important resource to the Kuba, it was not as important to the Europeans so there was little demand for it. Annual exports from all of Congo stagnated around one hundred tons except during World War II when it was used for the manufacture of ammunitions. But from the perspective of the Kuba, the export of embroidered or velvet cloth to outsiders was more important and occurred in quantities that were not negligible to them. The production and sale of such objects for the European market began shortly after 1885, and the demand never abated so that by the late 1930s lengths of cloth exported began to be made on order, especially at Nsheng. To the Kuba people, such sales were important because they brought them more personal freedom by allowing people to earn money outside the exploitative system set up by the colonial authorities. With this money, they could pay the taxes that the Belgian government had charged them. And so, the raffia tree became an emblem of how to evade its impositions in contrast to the oil palm and cotton, which became emblems of colonial exploitation.\textsuperscript{138}

According to Portuguese trader Antonio Ferreira da Silva Porto, the Kuba produced their own high-quality raffia textiles, but they were only permitted to wear wrappers of raffia cloth; only their king, his wives, and a few privileged persons could wear trade cloth. (see figure 20)

\textsuperscript{137} Vansina, \textit{Being Colonized}, 22.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 123-124.
Figure 20: Monni Adams, royal women in ceremonial costume. the only wife of the present ritual king of the bushong stands at left in official dress in her skirt, red trade cloth has replaced the plush panels. her companion and aide in craftwork is one of the wives of the former king she wears a long, sparsely appliqued and embroidered wraparound garment under a flounce-edged skirt of linear patterned embroidery.

These rules meant that the Kuba usually refused to accept any imported cloth and sold their ivory for cowries or for slaves instead.\textsuperscript{139} The raffia palm fibers used for ceremonial skirts should however not be confused with those used during initiation rites of Kuba men, the \textit{makadi}

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 15.
raffia palm, which is uncultivated raffia palm. *Makadi* palm is considered dangerous to women as it can affect the health and fertility of women especially during their childbearing years and is believed to cause even death to those who come too close to it and was believed to cause to stillbirth.\(^{140}\) The *makadi* palm initiation costumes made by the initiates are temporary and are destroyed by the end of the initiation rites and replaced with finely woven raffia textiles typically worn by initiated men for ceremonies.\(^{141}\) Binkley describes the initiation rites as transitional, like childhood. The materials used during the rites are short-lived and meant to show the gradual acquisition of initiation lore by the novices. By wearing and displaying the finely woven textiles at the final dance of the rites, the initiated youth are finally considered to be fully-fledged men.\(^{142}\) Although not practiced in some parts of the Kuba kingdom, with this practice we see that raffia and in turn raffia textiles play a big part in the knowledge acquisition and the molding of the youth. Raffia cloth becomes an indicator of maturity and responsibility. This cloth and the process of obtaining it holds great meaning to the youth. It is extremely important as the Southern Kuba initiation rites are rare events, with about fifteen or more years between its occurrences.\(^{143}\)

No longer worn daily, there has been a decrease in how often the skirts are worn over the last century. The raffia skirts are now worn only during ritual dance ceremonies. Historically, dance festivals would occur at the installation or death of an official, at the end of mourning, or anytime the king ordered one. Ceremonial skirts can also be seen worn during the funeral dance at funerals of high-ranked titleholders, at which the elders have traditionally worn their


\(^{141}\) Binkley, "Southern Kuba Initiation Rites," 55.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 58.

\(^{143}\) Ibid.
embroidered cloth. Ceremonial skirts are most seen on the dead. The goods accompanying the deceased are a testament to their traditions, beliefs, and the significance of social relationships within each community. The raffia skirts become a symbol for wealth, security, and continuity as the tradition is upheld daily throughout the kingdom. The cloth has retained its association with wealth or value in the Kuba area and can readily be seen in the several other uses for which it has been employed. The raffia cloth was also worn for festive occasions as well as during funerals, where the elders attend in their best finery. Indeed, during the time of Darish’s research, the most common occasion for the display of Kuba textiles was at funerals. Raffia cloth represented a family's wealth and abundance and was used in ceremonies and funerals and as well as in home decoration.

The most spectacular use of Kuba textiles is in the costumes. The last great costumed ritual occurred at the installation of the present nyimi, or king (fig. 21).

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144 Weiner and Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience*, 129.
This event took place in 1969 and since that installation, the grand aspect of the court ceremonial has declined.\textsuperscript{145} Even in everyday life, men of the ruling ethnic group, the Bushong, wore a distinctive, gathered skirt of red barkcloth woven palm fiber (fig. 22).

\footnote{145 Monni Adams. “Kuba Embroidered Cloth.” \textit{African Arts} 12, no. 1 (1978): 27.}
Figure 2: Eliot Elisofon, Kuba hatmaker, Photograph, 1971, Mushenge, Congo (Democratic Republic)
Figure 23: Eliot Elisofon, Kuba man weaving a mat, Mushenge, Congo (Democratic Republic)
On festival days, traditionally occurring once a month, one saw a burst of visual variety in the costumes, and a full panoply of textile arts made its appearance.\textsuperscript{146} The most elaborate costume is the white outfit of the king (fig 21), which he wears at its fullest only at his installation and burial. The main part of the costume is the skirt. The skirts for both men and women comprise of several pieces of cloth forming a panel two to three meters in average length. Men’s skirts are gathered around the hips, the upper end folding over a belt, the lower edge hanging down below the knees (fig. 25).

\textsuperscript{146} Adams. “Kuba Embroidered Cloth,” 27.
Figure 25: Unknown Photographer, Arrival of Kuba Prince Guy Kwete, Son of King Kot-A- Mbweeky, photograph, 2012, Democratic Republic of Congo
The men’s ceremonial cloth is made of barkcloth (now replaced by industrial cloth), often checkered in red and white squares, display special border ornamentation consisting of small, checked pieces, plush bands, fringes and tassels. (fig. 26) Women drape their ornamental skirts around their bodies, the lower edges reaching below mid-calves. These wraparound skirts in white or red woven raffia fiber are covered with linear designs in black embroidered stitching, which also outlines small, appliqued patches of cloth. Over the wrap, a woman adds a smaller
skirt, consisting of a central panel of embroidered black designs on raffia cloth or of tiny pieces of light-and-dark barkcloth, and, as on men’s skirts, a border of plus designs. (fig. 24)\textsuperscript{147}

As highly prized objects of value, these decorated cloths are used as gifts in establishing relations of reciprocity. For example, at a betrothal a youth’s female relatives embroider a skirt that he has woven for the bride-to-be, and later the in-laws will benefit from the work performed by the wife.\textsuperscript{148} Among some Kuba groups in the nineteenth century, raffia cloth and decorated skirts figured into marital contracts. According to historian Jan Vasina the men’s or women’s decorated skirts were used as a form of compensation for legal disputes such as adultery or divorces.\textsuperscript{149}

Congolese men, just like women, once wore one or two pieces of raffia cloth around their waist. Later, printed material replaced the raffia. Until the 1940s and early 1950s, men in some countryside villages dress in cloth material (\textit{kikwembe}) wrapped around the hips with the upper edge pulled through a belt and the waist and turned over several times to form a roll (\textit{tshifunda}) (fig. 28).\textsuperscript{150}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
The Kuba cloth is part of the long history and traditions of the Democratic Republic of Congo. These cloths offer the wearer the opportunity to express themselves and their identities to their society. The cloth embodies an aura of wealth, dignity, pride and belonging.

How do you build a national identity for a country that is filled with many different ethnic groups? The Democratic Republic of Congo, which seems to be democratic in name only, is a country in central Africa that contains numerous ethnic groups, about two hundred and fifty in number. One thing to note about the ethnic groups of the once Congo Free State, now Democratic Republic of Congo, is that there were a lot of ethnic groups that were renowned for their artistry. For example, the Mangbetu people were and are known for their decorative arts.
Their artistic productions include knives, ivory horns, and ceramic pots, among others.\textsuperscript{151}

However, when discussing the topic of textiles, one cannot ignore one of the most well-known African textiles, the Kuba cloth. Kuba art is famous throughout the world and has been displayed in many museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The makers of this textile can be found in the Kuba Kingdom of the DRC. The Kuba kingdom is believed to have emerged sometime between 1200 and 1500. Other kingdoms were forming at this period: the Kongo, Luba, Lunda and Mangbetu kingdoms.\textsuperscript{152} The kingdom is in central Congo between Kasai and Sankuru rivers, and the name “Kuba” was given by neighboring peoples before being adopted by the Western world. This name refers to about seventeen or more ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{153} While most Kuba-related ethnic groups are organized into independent chiefdoms, they recognize the traditional authority of the Kuba paramount ruler.\textsuperscript{154} The peoples that live within this area display a range of artistic expression that includes varieties of poetry, carvings, and spectacular costumes worn by men and women on special occasions. The Kuba attach great importance to their past. They view it as the force that has shaped their identity over the centuries and as the main source of their cultural pride today. There are also certain kinds of art, patterns and objects that recall Kuba history. Every Kuba king is credited with the invention of a particular pattern. These patterns were used in the decoration of their royal palaces, in woven mats and fabrics, and in various carvings of wooden art objects.\textsuperscript{155} There are three kinds of woven raffia cloth. A plain-woven cloth (\textit{mbala}) which is used for most kinds of skirts and is the most common cloth produced in the region. There is also the \textit{Mbala badinga}, which is woven with an extra design

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{151} Mukenge, \textit{Culture and Customs of the Congo}, 112.
\textsuperscript{153} Weiner and Schneider, \textit{Cloth and Human Experience}, 118.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 119.
\end{flushleft}
stick, which introduces a pattern in the cloth and is used for certain men’s and women’s skirts. The third kind of cloth is a very coarse weave which is used purposes such as storage sacks or clothing worn exclusively for hunting and other work in the forest.\textsuperscript{156}

One of the standout features in all Kamuanga Ilunga’s work of art is the brightly and extravagantly draped wax print fabrics. Kamuanga Ilunga obtains these fabrics from the main market in Kinshasa and, with impressive precision, he recreates their patterns on his canvas, producing life-like painted renditions of the textiles.\textsuperscript{157} For example, in \textit{Fragile 4} (fig. 30) \textit{and 6} we see a very common textile print “the Moon,” (fig. 29) a motif that is popular on the African continent.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{moon_design}
\caption{The Moon, Design on African Wax Print from Vlisco, Vlisco}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{156} Weiner and Schneider, \textit{Cloth and Human Experience}, 122
The textiles on his characters are vibrant and full and are painted in a manner resembling costumes found in European history paintings. But these textiles are part of the contemporary identity of his characters and their importance can be felt clearly in the way Kamuanga has chosen to paint them. Even though these characters are lost and confused, the one thing they are sure of is their current identity and the textiles that represent that.

As an artist born during the current period of post-colonial Congo, Kamuanga Ilunga can provide a commentary on the current state of Congolese traditions as well as to trace and hypothesize what the country is going through. Born in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1991, he studied painting at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Kinshasa, where he now currently lives and works. Kamuanga Ilunga found the style of teaching at the Académie very stifling since
it was reminiscent of the 19th-century style of figuration and left in 2011. In conjunction with other artists, Kamuanga Ilunga established M’Pongo, a group studio where a diverse set of young artists shared ideas and exhibited together to generate their own vibrant scene, which tapped into the high-energy creativity of contemporary Kinshasa.158

Post-colonialism saw a coincidental increase in urbanization. With this development, not only do the people move further away from the countryside, but they also abandon traditional practices. This does not necessarily mean Westernization, but a hybrid of different cultures. What Kamuanga Ilunga suggests in his work is that the presence of traditional cultures in this hybrid is slowly fading away and being forgotten, leaving only the Western culture. Kamuanga Ilunga’s work focuses on these encounters between different cultures. In one of his series, “Mangbetu,” Kamuanga Ilunga explores what remains of the history of the Mangbetu people. Based on a study he conducted, Kamuanga Ilunga provides insights into the current state of the Mangbetu ethnic group that ruled until colonization in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Most of the country’s citizens are devout Christians and completely reject the country’s multi-ethnic traditional heritage. The artist’s own mother, a modern woman who supported and raised her large family alone, did not want him to undertake a research trip to visit the people from her own ethnic grouping, the Mangbetu, labelling them as pagan and even dangerous. His mother is the embodiment of the thoughts and beliefs of the current generation of the Democratic Republic of Congo who see traditional cultures as backward and unacceptable. These are the thoughts of the colonial masters that some Congolese have accepted and adopted. The citizens would rather forget that their traditions existed and continue to live the way they have been instructed and forced to. In all his paintings, Kamuanga Illunga’s figures seem to mourn this loss of their traditional cultures, as seen in Reconnaissance (fig. 30) and Reconnaissance II. In this

work, the figures wear bright fabrics that hang limply from their bodies, their hands clutching ritual objects whose functions seem less and less apparent.¹⁵⁹

Kamuanga Ilunga’s characters are representations of the Congolese who are experiencing the lack of tradition and culture in their lives. One could say that they feel empty and incomplete without a

past to look back on. These characters embody the loss and despair that comes with losing a part of oneself, in this case one’s traditions and culture. Kamuanga Ilunga tries to preserve what remains of history and revive the glory of the past.

Another unique feature of Kamuanga Ilunga’s work can be found on the skin of his characters. Their skin is painted with a circuit design, to look as though it is made up of computer mother boards and chips. The Democratic Republic is the largest exporter of coltan, a raw material that is used in computer chips and mobile phones. This makes it a large part of the Congolese economy, and the material plays a large role in their lives. By making the coltan part of the characters’ bodies, it is safe to assume that this material cannot be separated from Congolese life. Two things that are constant in his work are Dutch Wax print textiles and the electronic patterned skin of his characters. What Kamuanga Ilunga represents are people of African origin who have been exploited and appropriated by the west and resold as new commodities. The result is that their identity has become realized only through their relationships with the Other, with the colonizers who suppressed local identity by suppressing traditional practices.

In his *Fragile Responsibility* series, the artist is focused specifically on the economy of porcelain in the Congo, which was used as currency in the trading of slaves during the colonial era. “I went on a trail researching ceramics in villages. Some are still in people’s houses; they look after them as treasures possessing a spiritual mystique.” Local leaders were deceived into believing these luxury items could confer Western power. According to the artist, “Porcelain was not only used to pay for slaves, but to buy land and influence — a system of corruption established by the Portuguese and Belgians. This is a system that has continued to this day with businesses from countries like America, Europe and China exploiting the mines in Congo, practically reducing
Kamuanga Ilunga uses his paintings as a point of reflection for both the corrupt country leaders and the society who experience this corruption of the past and the present. The symbols that Kamuanga Ilunga uses in the backgrounds of his paintings are ideographic symbols of a pre-colonial visual language he found in books. He explains that “If you show these symbols today, no one can interpret them. They’ve been erased.” Furthermore, he adds, “I grew up with a sense of loss, not having any notion of the past through my background or education. Most Congolese don’t have a sense of history.” In the Congo, names and objects that should be praised and respected have lost their meaning. It is evident that the Western way of thinking has been adopted by many Congolese. When Kamuanga Ilunga heard the word Mangbetu being used as an insult he “was surprised because Mangbetu people were renowned for resisting colonial power.” For the artist, the Mangbetu people embody questions of power and representation. Rather than make use of the abundant raffia that existed in their country and had already been established as a cloth type for certain ethnic groups, they choose to use a cloth that was not truly theirs, a textile that had been created by outsiders.

While Ghana turned to traditional textiles as a means of creating an authentically modern African identity, the DRC adopted machine printed wax textiles as the indicator for their identity and the traditional textiles faded to the background. Kamuanga Ilunga’s art embodies this dichotomy. His subjects look like they want to go back to the past, but they are stuck in the

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160 Maya Jaggi, “Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga: Understanding the Present through the Past,” Subscribe to read | Financial Times (Financial Times, May 11, 2018), https://www.ft.com/content/5ad73f7c-521c-11e8-84f4-43d65af59d43.
161 Ibid.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
present. They are unsure about the path they are supposed to take. His paintings exemplify the need to understand the present by knowing and understanding the past.
Chapter Three

Aissa Dione and the Senegalese Manjak Cloth

In this chapter I will examine how artists explore the negotiation between tradition and globalization, through the reinterpretation of textile practices at the intersections of culture and commodity. The revitalization of tradition must respond to the exigencies of the present, even as it engages with the past, in order to be fully recognized by a contemporary audience and embraced within the African peoples’ own concepts of culture and identity. Current trends suggest that tradition must die to make way for modernity, which ensures an assimilation or erasure of existing practices with new practices. However, identity is not merely an abstract concept, but a recognition of cultural practices that foster opportunities for acceptance, positive change, and development to occur. Moving forward does not mean forgetting tradition, since both past and present can exist at the same time. To achieve this coeval synthesis, certain practices must be reintroduced into the society, but it’s important to assess the means by which such practices are not only revived but can be sustained. This sustainability is often located within the mechanisms of the global marketplace, in which “authentic” cultural products produced through traditional craft practices may come to serve as national brands. Specifically, I explore the work of the artist Aissa Dione of Senegal, who has been central to the revival of local craft practices in the production of Manjak cloth, and its application to the creation of consumer goods that, through their circulation within the global marketplace, have created a national brand. This elision between local cultural economies and the global cultural marketplace prompts a re-examination of the concept of ‘tradition’ as it relates to the meanings of such craft-produced textiles when they are removed from their historical contexts. I will demonstrate that tradition and innovation can co-exist within the project of nationalism, despite the inevitable tensions such
a co-existence provokes, by examining the transformational use of traditional textiles in the creation of new commodities. The dissemination of such commodities can forge a national ‘brand’ that has diasporic as well as local resonance in the creation of national identity. At the same time, I will explore the complexities of national identity in the African context by looking at the history behind Dione’s brand, and the struggle between national identity and Pan-Africanism during the struggle for independence. Pan-Africanism refers to the philosophies that promote a united and one Africa. As a political movement, Pan Africanism fought for the liberation and unity of Africa after slavery and the interactions with modernity. In the eyes of Pan Africanists, the African continent was and is seen as the symbol of freedom. The colonial nation-states that were created after the Berlin Conference of 1885, “formed the foundation for the continued destruction of African history, culture, and unity” ¹⁶⁵ but it did not negate the idea of a united Africa and an undivided continent. Africans want to be themselves; their ways of expression should not and cannot be limited or dictated.

This chapter focusses on the textile originally made by the Manjak people who are found mainly in Guinea Bissau, in Senegal and in Gambia, Cape Verde, as well as certain parts of France. This is a fabric steeped in history and culture and synonymous with the Manjak woven loincloth, commonly known in Senegal as “sëru njaago.”¹⁶⁶ The Manjak ethnic group is one of the most prominent in the Casamance. At the height of its use, this textile was considered a signifier of wealth and even used as a talisman. The Manjak fabric, with its brightly coloured designs standing in relief against a black or white background, is made using a complex weft-

float technique that requires two weavers.\textsuperscript{167} Weft floats are when your weft thread passes over top of more than one of the warp threads at one time. The Manjak woven cloth has been present and used during major family ceremonies and holds a lot of ceremonial importance.

These fabrics are used to mark the main rites of passage in a person’s life, particularly in the lives of women. It is commonly used as a bed sheet, a fertility aid when conceiving, a receiving blanket at birth, as a symbol of the link between a newborn and its community at the time of christening, as a blanket lining the cradle to protect the infant from sudden death, and as a wrap to carry the baby on the mother’s back. The cloth, when wrapped tightly around the mother and baby, is believed to serve as protection from mystical aggressions. During weddings

it is used as a marriage veil and during funerals it is used as a form of comfort and as a shroud in a person’s final moments of life.\textsuperscript{168} Today, Manjak weavers still use the looms and techniques their ancestors acquired from the Portuguese when brought as slaves to the Cape Verde islands in the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{169} The designs and technology of Manjak cloth originated from the highly valued cloth currency produced by African slaves for the Portuguese on the Cape Verde Islands, beginning in the mid-1500.\textsuperscript{170}

Nowadays, this textile is being used in several industries, from the fashion world to interior decoration. As tradition and culture slowly transitioned and changed, so did the uses of the textile by the Senegalese people. Over time, fewer people were willing to learn the traditional weaving craft, leading to the Manjak weaving traditions slowly fading away. According to artist Scott Andresen, Aissa Dione has mentioned that a few of the weavers in her workshop are teaching the younger generation about weaving and the Manjak. However, this younger generation is not interested, and they don’t see a bright future in it.\textsuperscript{171} Because of this, it may become difficult to find traditional weavers in the future. Luckily Manjak fabrics still play a role culturally in West Africa. This is unfortunately countered by cheaper mass-produced fabrics continually flooding the market, and in a developing country such as Senegal, cost is a major factor in usage and popularity.\textsuperscript{172} As explained by Assane Diop, the head weaver at Galerie Atelier TÊSSS (TÊSSS is Wolof for beautiful, too much or busy), many young Manjak men of today, as the weavers are traditionally men, are not learning the craft of weaving because it is

\textsuperscript{170} Heath, “Fashion, Anti-Fashion, and Heteroglossia in Urban Senegal, 22.
\textsuperscript{172} Flock, “Artist Scott Andresen Talks Manjak and Collaboration at Kehinde Wiley’s Black Rock.”
difficult labor and does not pay well. Interestingly, Diop, who is not a member of the Manjak community defied his Touchouler traditions and became a dedicated Manjak weaver. In collaboration with Mai Diop, who is originally from France and the founder of TESSS, they research and recreate the traditional patterns and fabrics that are of great importance to the Manjak community.173

In addition to its practical uses the cloth is also especially revered among the Manjaks. Like rice and herds, it is a symbol of wealth, and considered a luxury product. Present during the most important ceremonies of almost all the ethnic groups of Senegal, the loincloth accompanies a man from his birth to his death.174 In an interview with Laura Cochrane, Seerer weaver Issa Diagne, who lives and works in Poponguine, states that the first weavers of cloth were the Manjaks who lived in the forest. The folk stories about how weaving became known to mankind are almost all the same. Cochrane discusses the Haal Pulaar and Manjak histories of the beginning of weaving, which are based in forest encounters between spiritual beings – specifically, the jinn – and their ancestors. Their ancestors learned to weave from the jinn with bravery, because they were creatures of fire mentioned in the Qur’an that had unpredictable behavior which made any encounter with them dangerous.175 The new weavers, who survived the encounter with these dangerous fire creatures, were able to gain valuable knowledge, and to share it with others so that all of them would be able to keep themselves warm using the cloth that they wove.”176

The contemporary revitalization of the traditions of Manjak weaving is linked to economic renewal in Senegal, and the foundation of a sustainable industry with distinct ties to Senegalese identity and nationalism. An artist like Aissa Dione, has revived textile patterns and motifs associated with the history of the Senegal people in order to establish an industry that is exclusively based in Senegal. The reclamation of African identities is grounded in the intersections between culture and economy, which stimulates growth in the aggregate, rather than the subsistence of “philanthropic” models.

Dione, born to a French mother and Senegalese father in 1952 in Dakar, is a renowned painter and textile designer who grew up in France. She attended the School of Fine Arts in Chelles before leaving for Senegal at the age of 20 to pursue a career as an artist. Dione was approached by a potential buyer of her work, Pierre Babacar Kama, who said he would like her to redesign his offices. Dione admits she “bluffed” by confidently responding that she could manage such an undertaking. Rather than use imported European furnishings and styles, Dione used locally produced materials, fabrics, and tools, and a team consisting of locally hired trades people. Dione found inspiration in the rich indigenous culture and textile heritage of Senegal and integrated the “traditional weaving and decorative motifs into a stylish, functional, organized, and comfortable workspace.”

Dione started her textile workshop with the last remaining master weavers of the Mandjaque peoples in Senegal. Instead of using the same traditional materials used in Manjak weaving, Dione mixed cotton with raffia, as she felt that was a soft but strong material that could easily be woven with other fibers. Dione also experimented with mixing cotton and silk. These new combinations produced more durable cotton-based fabrics

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178 Bryant, *Dazzling Women Designers*, 100.
which were ideal for upholstery and cushions.\textsuperscript{179} Dione also made changes to the size of the fabrics that were woven. Aissa Dione and the first weaver François Nango successfully widened the traditional loom, going from a width of 15cm – 20cm to 90 cm. Dione created an enlarged hand loom that allowed her to produce 140-cm length pieces. This allowed for the locally adapted patterns to appear clearer, bolder, and more contemporary.\textsuperscript{180}

Figure 32: Scott Andresen, Scott Andresen at a loom in Aissa Dione’s workshop, Dakar, Senegal.

Other workers sew the fabric into decorative items, such as cushions, handbags, luggage, and bedcovers. She has had exhibitions of her work in Europe and in 1992 she won the

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 98-100.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 107.
UNESCO Crafts Prize, which honored her contemporary hand-woven fabrics. A well-known European designer read the article on a business trip. Once settled back in the office, the designer picked up the phone and placed an order for some of Dione’s fabric. The haute-couture designer loved the look and feel of the fabric and spread the word through the design community. Soon, more orders began coming in from other European designers. Dione was excited by the response, and, with all these orders in hand, felt it was time to register her textile design business. She founded Aissa Dione Tissus in 1992. Her mission was and is to revive Senegal’s unique traditional fabric weaving craftsmanship and build a production chain that is truly “100% Made in Senegal.” Her approach is to combine unique design, traditional weaving and local textile industry know-how and artisan craftsmanship to transform African grown cotton into a valuable product. She has succeeded in this, building a high-end fabric brand underpinned by centuries old cotton processing and weaving skills. Today, Aissa Dione Tissus has more than 100 employees whose traditional handwoven fabrics are delivered to top-end interior design brands across Africa, Europe and the United States. She now supplies fabric to Hermes, Fendi, Christian Liaigre, and other famous fashion design houses.

By coming to textile practices as both a woman and an artist, Dione was challenging aspects of traditional social and cultural hierarchies. In Senegal, men traditionally performed the art of weaving. There were very few women weavers or textile workers. Because of that, Dione did not have a female mentor or role model to help her get started. She set up her company with the hope that she could improve the local economy and create jobs and was concerned about the impact the company could have on the community and country. As a graduate of fine arts

181 Ibid.
182 Ibid., 102-103.
studies, Aissa combined her own artistic knowledge with traditional local techniques, such as Mandjaque weaving, to fashion bands of linen used in home interiors and furniture coverings. To create just the right look, she even built a new weaving loom to prepare the fabrics she wanted to use. The result was a success, and the local media took an interest in the work she had produced. Such media attention caught the eye of a prominent European designer who saw photographs of her fabrics in an article which appeared in an airline magazine, and soon she began receiving international orders. Her work has been well received by nations and Dione has also been working with the government of Togo and Burkina Faso to develop and save existing weaving cultures from disappearing by creating sophisticated designs, improving quality and training the weavers to propel weaving arts to the heights of textile for commercial use while maintain the uniqueness each culture has. The manjak cloth has been transformed from being an important ritual fabric for many groups to becoming a manjak symbol and having an economic value. These changes have however caused some discomfort among some people because it is considered that dressmakers from the north of Senegal have appropriated sacred designs that can only be used by those who have been initiated.


Figure 33: Large Comb Collection Black – Camel, photograph, Dakar
She was also pleased that her textiles and furnishings could showcase Senegalese art and culture in Europe and North America. In the past, Senegal had exported the majority of its cotton. Dione’s business, selling home-furnishing products that were grown, dyed, woven, and sewn by Senegalese workers, diversified the local economy. “This is both good for my business and for the region,” Dione mentioned to Bryant. “Africa can do more than simply send its raw
goods overseas.” Dione’s employees work with textiles in many ways. As already mentioned before, fabric weaving is not a very lucrative endeavor, and this discourages the youth from pursuing a career in this field. The result is that the number of people with knowledge about these traditional weaving practices slowly decreases with each new generation. Fashions and innovations are influenced by existing traditions, but as changes and progress occur, these are in turn adapted to keep up with the new developments. The combining of tradition and innovation has synthesized local craft production into the creation of new textiles that maintain aspects of tradition, but that permit uses separate from traditional practices. Dione’s business practices facilitate this balance between continuity and change. Dione also designs furniture upholstery (fig. 34), wallets, pillowcases (fig. 33), and an array of other elegant accessories. Another branch of her business is dedicated to making furniture such as armchairs, couches or padded benches, footstools (fig. 35) and low upholstered tables that are covered in her woven traditional fabrics. Everything is available to purchase, or you can work with her directly for a customized design.187

186 Ibid., 102.
187 Ibid.
The enterprise requires permitting innovation while still maintaining authenticity. Allowing the cloth to function beyond its traditional contexts highlights new visibilities that draw attention to the traditional aspects of its manufacture, the weaving and dyeing practices that link these recognitions to Manjak tradition. The revitalization of the Manjak traditional weaving style revives the beliefs, histories, and traditions with which it is associated. Rather than have this textile remain in a static, and therefore primarily historic state, artists like Aissa Dione push
these textiles beyond their traditional contexts in order to re-animate them as signifiers of cultural identity on a global stage.

Interest in these cloths will always lead to more people finding out about the textile, which can signify several different levels of meaning, from the personal to the historical to the
aesthetic. One of the products of globalization is national branding, a form of identity branding forged by consumerism. By using symbols that are connected to the Manjak people, Dione creates a form of communication that is disseminated globally in connection with a distinct recognizable brand. There should however be a distinction between the traditional and contemporary motifs that can be used on the cloth so as not to take away from the meanings behind the original motifs. These new motifs that come up in contemporary textile production are indicative of the changes that are occurring within society, be it socially, culturally, politically, or religiously. To ensure that there is no conflict between the Manjak people, and the rest of society care must be taken when adopting traditional motifs and textiles.

But what happens to the understanding of traditional textiles when they’re used in home décor, fashion and accessories? Mai Diop and Aissa Dione find ways of adapting the textiles to be both traditional and global by challenging the very concept of “tradition.” When traditional textiles are used in unconventional contexts—in fashion, home décor, accessories—they can seem very disconnected from tradition and culture. Rather than the fabric staying a dying relic of a tradition, Dione seeks to elevate this textile past it restricted usage. As Walter Benjamin theorizes, tradition itself is very much alive and extremely changeable. As seen with the classical statue of Aphrodite (Venus,) to the Greeks, it was an object of worship, but to the clerics of the Middle Ages, it was a “threatening idol.”¹⁸⁸ These two groups of people were drawn by the aura (singularity) of the statue. Benjamin states that the “auric mode of being of the work of art”¹⁸⁹ should never be completely separated from its ritual function.¹⁹⁰ What this proves is that no clear

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¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 16.
line can be drawn between tradition and modernity (fashion). Who is to say what can and cannot be used? Should there even be a line drawn? We could say that the current iteration has been influenced by the originals, but not to the point of becoming simulacra, because they remain connected to both historical and contemporary national identities. The current iterations of the Manjak textile does the opposite of what Benjamin predicted, rather than become *l’art pour l’art*, and reject any kind of social function\(^{191}\), the textiles become a deeper part of the fabric of the nation and its people. But this emphasis on national citizenship ignores the reality of tribal and ethnic identities that remain divisive within Africa. By adopting the Manjak style of weaving and incorporating her own style into it, Aissa Dione removes it from its ethnic exclusivity and creates a place for this cloth within the entire nation and not just in the context of the specific ethnic group. Although some consumers or clients may not fully grasp the meaning or origin of the textile that Dione uses, she manages to circulate it to a wider audience than just the Manjak people. This ensures that the cloth is seen as more than just a traditional cloth and becomes the product of the nation. Rather than limiting it to one ethnic group, it is still associated with the Manjak people of Senegal or Guinea Bissau while still signifying Senegal as a nation without detracting from the accomplishments of the original creators. Although ethnic groups are important and may be the root of one’s identity it is essential to also relate that identity to the nation to ensure that there is no excessive or serious division between the peoples. Works of art are viewed and valued on different scales, Benjamin draws attention to the cultic value and the display value of these works. With images or works produced for cultic purposes, their existence was more important than them being exhibited. Like elks painted by the Stone Age man on the walls of cave as an instrument for magic, although his fellow men saw the painting, its main

\(^{191}\) Ibid.
audience was the spirits. In the present age, cult value demands that the work remains hidden.

“As individual instances of artistic production become emancipated from the context of religious ritual, opportunities for displaying the products increase.”¹⁹² The authenticity that Benjamin refers to when he talks about aura, is not applicable as textiles are meant to be reproduced. Instead of them being based on ritual, the textile becomes underpinned by politics.¹⁹³ However, the reproductive quality of textiles does not “remove the thing reproduced from the realm of tradition.”¹⁹⁴ The authenticity of a thing refers to everything about the product that is transmissible from its creation, that is from its material duration to the history it has experienced.¹⁹⁵

Dione is not only interested in the revival of dying traditions she is also interested in the economic benefits these endeavors will create for the country in the long run. She believes that through targeted investments in the whole supply chain it is possible to build an economically viable local cotton industry based on small production units, like the one she has successfully created. A vision where quality and local craftsmanship, rather than quantity are the essence, even if it means swimming against the tide of how mainstream manufacturing and import/export models work in Africa. Dione, in appreciation of the tradition and creative prowess of local weavers and their crafts would rather have their products saturate the market than the imported materials seen on the market today. The designs and motifs have the strength to restore and reconstitute memories by bringing craft knowledge into the present.

¹⁹² Ibid., 17.
¹⁹³ Ibid., 16.
¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 12.
¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 11.
Dione wants consumers to purchase quality African-made textiles rather than settling for the cheaper, European wax-print copies: “Africa can do more than simply send its raw goods overseas [...] Spinning and textile industries have nearly all closed and traditional weavers are slowly but surely disappearing. It is a huge paradox. While millions of tons of cotton are being grown in west Africa, you can barely find a meter of finished textiles.”\(^{196}\) This aspect of Dione’s business is based off the idea of an African Renaissance, that came from the realization that even though Africa had gained political independence, Europe and North America still exploited the African countries. Africa still had to export her raw materials while still being marginalized, but supporting the industrial development of Europe, North America, and other countries.\(^{197}\)

Unfortunately, at this moment work at Aissa Dione Tissus is very labor intensive but also infrequent. Fluctuations in consumer demand makes it difficult for Dione to accept all the orders that come her way. This is because she would need to hire more people when large orders come in but when they drop it may result in her having to lay off some workers, even if temporarily.\(^{198}\) These fluctuations are indicative of the low levels of interest in traditionally woven textiles. They indicate that without a steady and stable increase in the acceptance and interest in traditional textiles, it is impossible to gauge production. Interest needs to grow all over the country to ensure the continuity of not only Manjak textiles but all traditional crafts. Marketing expert Lauren Bolinger, has observed that the most widely used woven textile by locals is produced by Manjak weavers, demonstrating the popularity of the textile in Senegal.\(^{199}\) By making her means of production exclusively Senegalese, Dione is exploring a new avenue for making the textile an

\(^{196}\) Bryant, *Dazzling Women Designers*, 102

\(^{197}\) Nhengeze and Malisa, *Pan-Africanism*, 11.

\(^{198}\) Bryant, *Dazzling Women Designers*, 106.

expression of national identity. Because the materials used are all sourced and created in Senegal, the workforce behind the textiles is purely Senegalese and the methods of dyeing and weaving are all traditional Senegalese practices, Aïssa Dione Tissus are 100 percent Senegalese and are consequently identified as a national brand, inextricably expressions of Senegalese identity. National identity is not just about expressing who and what you are to others, it is also about expressing it to yourself. The expression of one’s national identity is not limited to just what is shown to the outside world, it also involves personal expression, as having a national identity is not simply a matter for others or what others see but something that comes from within. Since national identity is experienced personally, it cannot be defined by what others see. Although not incorrect or insincere, wearing certain textiles only on national holidays has its limitations. This gap in the expression of a national identity, between the felt experience and the external expression, is addressed through the concept of banal nationalism, introduced by Michael Billig, which refers to the everyday representations of the nation that build a shared sense of national belonging. Billig defines nationalism as a “form of life which is daily lived in a world of nation states.” Billig introduces the term banal nationalism which refers to the “ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some observers have supposed” The textiles that Dione weaves and applies to everyday objects, like pillows and footstools, are woven in a traditional, authentic way, and bearing the label “Made in Senegal”, are comparable to wearable textiles in terms of their meaning and identity value. The histories, memories and traditions of the textile should still be present no matter what they are woven into. The new ways in which Dione utilizes the textiles ensures that they are continuously present in

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201 Ibid., 6.
the lives of the community and the nation. Instead of having to take the textiles out on only special occasions, they are constantly out in the open and serve as a daily reminder of identity and an individual’s connection to the nation. But the very everydayness of Dione’s textiles provokes anxieties as to whether the exclusivity of the cloth will be lost, and its capacity for nationalist expression lost within Senegalese society. Billig bases his thesis about banal nationalism on the hypothesis that there is a “continual ‘flagging’ or reminding of nationhood.” Placing these reminders within an environment that is familiar shifts their expressive capacity from serving as exceptional reminders of identity to a commonplace of everyday life. In other words, nationalism should not be a forced situation but more of an unconscious presence in one’s life. In opposition to this kind of banal nationalism, he categorizes ceremony and ritual as ‘hot’ nationalism. Identity is not a performance or something that requires constant reminders. For Billig, objects like Dione’s furniture pieces externalize the relationship and feelings people have about their nation or country. Rather than limit their feelings and thoughts to themselves they find a means of expression through objects. What Billig suggests is a way for humans to express themselves continuously and maybe unconsciously without it being an event that mandates an obvious expression: “This reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding.” Billig compares this to a flag that is hanging unnoticed on a public building rather than being consciously waved with fervent passion.

Performing the nation does not only occur at national events and spaces. It also occurs in “invisible” places like the home. Spaces like the home offer the opportunity for individuals to be consciously and continually reminded and aware of who they are and what they believe in. Webb

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202 Ibid., 7.
203 Ibid., 8
204 Ibid.
Keane states, “that how people handle, and value material goods may be implicated in how they use and interpret words, and vice versa, reflecting certain underlying assumptions about the world and the beings that inhabit it.”\textsuperscript{205} The choice of those objects expresses a semiotic ideology, even within the home. As Keane theorizes, people have underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions they do or do not serve and the consequences that these signs may or may not produce.\textsuperscript{206} Although it is fraction or group of people within that culture or nation that assign the signs or symbols meanings, and update and spread these meanings, there are still spread around and as time goes on more people unconsciously participate in the process of accepting, memorizing and passing down these signs and the sign objects. People are aware of those choices in the habits and social processes that organize and maintain their lives: Signs and objects become cultural symbols through the efforts of generations of people associated with that culture. As these signs and objects are passed down new interpretations of these symbols are introduced. Each generation is exposed to new stimuli which in turn causes individuals to be affected and influenced by different things. “Each generation gives its own interpretations of these phenomena, and identities change.”\textsuperscript{207} Culture and identities are not static and as such nations, individuals and groups of people adapt to changes that occur within their lives. These changes make it such that historical signs and symbols adopt new meanings to suit the times.

While an individual may not identify as strongly with an entire nation as “home,” they still feel a sense of belonging when thinking of their country. Someone will feel comfort or even nationalistic pride when recalling the country they identify with. In the case of Dione’s textiles,

their uses and meanings have been reinvented to fit into this context of ‘home’ as a site to sustain identity and to exhibit cultural resilience. Individuals who live away from home can re-create that home in their new environments. They find comfort with familiar things that remind them of home or that they associate with home or their identity. In this way, Dione moves away from the spectacular ‘hot’ culture and traditional displays and performances of identity to focus on this more quotidian, ‘banal’ nationalism. But this does not change the meaning that the objects hold. For example, some of these woven textiles were traditionally used as mats, so by using them in the same context, contemporary Senegalese can make themselves at home in their identities as well as within their domestic spaces. Because the cloth is woven in a traditional manner and imbued with all its original meanings, its signification is identical in its new setting. As an artist, Dione’s philosophy and works tie into the vision that the first president of Senegal had for the country and its arts.

The first president of Senegal Léopold Sédar Senghor (1960–81), also one of the founders of Négritude, believed that the arts were the best way to express Négritude and its anti-colonial messages. Senghorian Négritude can be defined as a search for and an attempt to overcome the “loss of identity suffered by Africans due to a history of slavery, colonialism, and racism.” Senghor believed that “culture is the very heartbeat that brings reason, rhyme, and rhythm to human life. Culture is the pulse and central purpose of life. Senghor claimed that “[a] mechanical world . . . without art would be a dead world, not worth living in.” Due to Senghor’s belief in the arts he encouraged the learning of arts and sponsored local students to receive the best European education in order to return to Senegal to apply what they had learnt.

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from the Europeans. According to anthropologist Laura Cochrane, “Senghor used patronage as an investment, expecting artists and intellectuals to either distinguish themselves abroad to call attention to Senegal, or to return to strengthen Senegal’s state programs.” Senghor’s concept of Négritude became an essential part of his policies in ensuring state support of the arts. Senghor’s version of Négritude emphasized the collective strength of ‘African culture’.

In Cochrane’s work, she examines how Senegal’s first national leaders created a criterion for artists which defined how they might practice and show nationalism through their work, especially in the weaving crafts, and how this was enforced through selective state patronage. This ideological and stylistic control echoed state control over economic markets. This endeavor was approached in two different ways by two administrators, Papa Ibra Tall from 1966-1975 and again from 1989-2010 and Ibrahima Mané. There were, of course, differing perspectives over how artists could express nationalism through their crafts and on how much the state could be involved in the arts; some leaders sought a singular national artistic vision, while others challenged that regional ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity made such a singular expression impossible. It became a question of whether the diversity of the nation should be acknowledged or whether the various accomplishments of each ethnic group should be ‘ignored’ and replaced with one style that would unite the nation without individuality or diversity. This highlights the tension between African nationalism and Pan-Africanism. African nationalism refers to the set of ideologies and political movements motivated by the idea of national self-determination. Robert Rotberg believes that the creation of territories by colonial powers and the

212 Ibid., 377.
policies and practices they forced upon these territories, led to the indigenous inhabitants coming
together accepting their status as nationals of the same nation. This led them to “think almost
exclusively in terms of achieving their freedom from alien rule within the perimeters of their
colonial existence.”

This is different from Pan-Africanism which seeks to unify several or all
African nations under one nation? In Senegal, these ideas and tensions were explored by two key
art administrators, Tall and Mané. Under the patronage of Senghor, Tall pursued his education in
Paris, where he gained experience in the beaux arts and researched new techniques for tapestry
weaving while looking for a new style of visual expression. Tall, Cochrane tells us, “started to
consider naturalism as not an innocuous style but an aesthetic imposition by an imperial state.”

Senghor’s administration chose tapestries, an art form that differed in style and production
techniques from traditional, ethnicity-specific arts, particularly weaving. The administration
chose this nationalist tapestry style to represent the nation and did not sponsor the established
regional arts. The administration exerted financial control by funding one art form because
they perceived a threat to cohesive nationalism in their nation’s long-established diversity of arts.
An ethnically plural society may be seen as a detriment to the interests of a concept of
nationalism that does not seem to accommodate diversity. In response to the ‘threat’ about ethnic
plurality, Senghor sponsored arts that he hoped would encompass ethnic pluralism and
emphasize national unity.

Papa Ibra Tall was an administrator loyal to Senghor and believed in his ideologies. The
nationalistic approach that Tall enforced similarly reflected his belief in the work of Senghor.

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215 Ibid., 381.
Tall believed that artists should be trained within national institutions. This is reflected in Senghor’s directive to use individual talents in service of the nation. More broadly, it shows a mid-twentieth century optimism about the efficacy of state-run cultural institutions. Tall believed that having an institutional education was necessary and a natural precursor to any societal change. According to Cochrane, these state-sponsored arts institutions became symbols of inconsistent ideologies. While Tall worked against a French system of the arts – including an aesthetic style, naturalism and an art historical canon that omitted artists of African descent – he advocated aspects of a French system of artistic expression and training. The institutional model Tall employed could be considered the opposite of the typical West African models, which was apprenticeship-based training. Similar to Senghor, Tall adopted French philosophies of formal education in the arts and coupled those ideals with denunciations of colonial impositions. While Tall talked about the French imprint on the arts in Senegal, he neither condemned this imprint nor explicitly stated his role in bringing about aspects of this imprint.

In partnership with several other national arts leaders, Tall helped found a state-sponsored tapestry factory in the 1960s, the Manufacture Sénégalaise des Arts Décoratifs (MSAD). The MSAD’s style of weaving was intended to transcend, rather than grow out of, regional weaving traditions associated with ethnicities. Tall equates the modernity of a nation with the modernity of its artistic style. A relatively small group of weavers at the MSAD continue to work within the strict framework of the institutional style, creating tapestries used as state gifts for visiting dignitaries and for official functions.

216 Ibid., 383-384.
217 Ibid., 384.
The tapestries created by the weavers at MSAD became the official textile of the nation and became the standard for textile weavers in the country (fig. 37). Cochrane records how the weaving style has evolved over time: “Through informal mentorships with MSAD weavers, a network of weavers in Thiès has grown to practice these same styles and techniques yet operate small workshops privately. They use these aspects of the nationalist style yet combine them with other influences for greater individual expression and access to diverse markets.”\textsuperscript{218} MSAD became a public symbol of national arts heritage and of self-sufficiency, a significant issue as

\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 378.
newly independent Senegal gained its economic footing in the 1960s. Another related goal was to produce tapestries as symbols of the nation to hang in embassies and presidential residences around the world. Foreign state visitors to Senegal often receive a tapestry, and the President Abdoulaye Wade (2000-2012) made formal televised addresses in front of an MSAD-produced tapestry.\textsuperscript{219} The changes that are being made in terms of the institution and the styles produced speaks to how time changes things. Although the weavers have accepted that there is a specific style that is indicative of the country, they realize that as aesthetics and interest change so must their craft. Like Dione, in order to achieve recognition and interest in their works the weavers need to adjust certain aspects of their process.

Taking an opposite approach from Tall, Ibrahima Mané helped direct a state-sponsored project to support the already-existing artisan sector. Mané believed that national arts projects were possible precisely because of the nation’s heritage of ethnic arts. Rather than creating a whole new style solely for the nation, he believed that national arts should be influenced by the ethnic arts.\textsuperscript{220} Mané’s perspective on artistic recognizes that nationalism’s power comes from reinterpretations of a nation’s ethnic heritages and symbols: “In other words, the arts are integral to Senegal’s plural identities as well as to its national identity.”\textsuperscript{221}

According to Mané, the weaving practices in Senegal are based on ethnic considerations, one of which was class-based professions. Ethnic groups have a history of casted professions. The class system has guided the social status, marriage, and professions of the Senegalese people. An example was the Wolof artisanal caste, which included weavers, who lived apart from their families and were respected for their skills but were also feared and suffered social

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 384.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 378
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid.
These ethnicity-based divisions were very influential in the social lives of the community members. Mané states that the caste systems today have less influence over peoples’ professional choices. For Mané, traditional artists are those whose activities are animated by caste elements. This includes painting, weaving and woodworking, no matter their ever-changing styles or techniques. While these artisans may use new technologies and be inspired to make new products, they use the same materials and techniques as their predecessors. On the other hand, modern arts are practices like painting cars or metalworking, activities which the caste system never covered. Any weaving history, according to Mané, is rooted in the region’s ethnicities and is a continuation of those ethnic conceptions of that art. According to Mane’s definition, Aissa Dione would be defined as a traditional artist. No matter the styles she weaves or the products that she makes from the textiles she weaves, she would still be considered a traditional artist since she is keeping up with the weaving traditions of the Manjak weavers. Knowing and understanding how the textiles are made, and adhering to these time consuming and labor-intensive practices, also embraces the objects created with these textiles as traditional markers of culture. Appreciating the effort of the process itself adds to the emotional resonance and meaning of the final consumer product. These are not just machine-made textiles, which means that the objects made from them are considered equally as cultural products.

The cultural significance of the textile is not just inherent in the representational aspect of its motifs, but in its traditional form of manufacture. The traditional loom used in West-African weaving is the narrow strip loom, which has a thousand-year history. Even though various

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222 Ibid., 386.
223 Ibid.
224 Ibid.
225 Ibid.
ethnicities in the Senegambian region have their own styles of weaving, they all use the narrow loom to produce strip cloth. The Sereer and Tukulor ethnicities produce a strip cloth characterized by long stripes of color in varying, rather than uniform, widths. Manjak weavers set themselves apart through the brocading techniques they use, which result in brightly colored designs floating in relief against darker backgrounds. Weavers using the narrow loom and the techniques associated with it are often described as “traditional,” which sets them apart from weavers who use the wide loom associated with the “nationalist” style. Senghor’s vision of the use of the wide loom to produce a nationalist style of tapestry is considered by traditional weavers as “so removed from regional ethnic histories that it has no connection to Senegalese identity: it is ‘imported’.”

Thus, the structure of the loom is as charged with meaning as the cloth itself: “Changing the structure of the loom would mean losing the social and historical value of not only their loom, but also their weaving work.”

Mané believed artistic diversity was needed, specifically that of ethnic heritages, for artistic nationalism to thrive. This would mean that artists like Aissa Dione are necessary contributors to the development of an artistic nationalism, as they combine old and new styles and techniques to both root their work in the region and keep their work vibrant. Neither traditional nor nationalist styles are obsolete. They have been modified so that they are in conversation with contemporary arts. As a result, the nationalist style has not turned into one unified style, as Tall and his colleagues envisioned and instituted in the 1960s. Cochrane believes that “artistic nationalism remains significant in Senegal because artists continually update it, keeping it relevant in both Senegalese and international contemporary arts scenes.”

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226 Ibid., 387.
227 Cochrane, “Senegalese Weavers’ Ethnic Identities, in Discourse and in Craft,” 10
continues: “They have done so by individually varying on the nationalist style, discursively referring to the importance of artistic nationalism and participating in art markets not tied to state control. Rather than rejecting it outright, weavers have transformed the strict definition of artistic nationalism into a plurality of legitimate artistic expressions of nationalism.”

By introducing new and various applications of the Manjak textile, Dione frees it from strictly belonging to one group. Through its transformation into decorative objects and its global dissemination, the textile can exist in multiple contexts while still maintaining its relationship to its original ‘home’. As Cochrane points out, “sustaining a craft business relies on adaptability and constant change, but it must be validated by core communal understandings, such as basic professional and ethnic identities.”

Aissa Dione’s works speak to their Senegalese origins while speaking to a global Senegalese identity. Weavers make the case that supporting their community is a part of their ethnic heritage as well as a present-day responsibility. A pattern of urban migration required local development efforts in rural environments to which Dione’s business responded, while simultaneously creating a global market essential to the sustainability of local cotton production and traditional manufacture. The subtext of this theme is that traditional textile production was adapted to a globally interconnected world while remaining connected to its traditional heritage.

Rather than seeing this quest for a national identity through traditional textile weaving as a reversion to the past, one must consider that “telling histories is a way of attributing significance and value to both the past and the present. This heritage gives the objects weavers

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229 Ibid., 392-393.
230 Cochrane, “Senegalese Weavers’ Ethnic Identities, in Discourse and in Craft,” 8
231 Ibid., 4
make greater social value and gives the weavers themselves greater social value in their community.”

In the ongoing dialogue between tradition and progress that frames any discussion of culture, one thing that most scholars agree on is that the word tradition is often very limiting because it is associated with the past and with an idea of history as a distinct place that is distant, inaccessible and unchangeable. However, as Edensor notes, “culture is not fixed but negotiated, the subject of dialogue and creativity, influenced by the contexts in which it is produced and used.” Cultural tradition is therefore never fixed in the past but is constantly adapted to its present circumstances. Artists like Aissa Dione embrace the continuities of tradition by keeping traditional practices alive in the present where they can participate on the global stage in the performance of a reimagined nationhood. Within Senegal itself, and throughout the diaspora, Dione’s creations place these textiles within the realm of an everyday, lived nationalism. By creating an art that is 100 percent Senegalese, she is contributing not only to cultural sustainability but to economic stability that is fundamental to national independence and identity.

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232 Ibid., 9
Chapter Four

Restitution and Renewal: The Case for Cultural Property

This chapter examines the role that artefacts play in the practices and traditions of a collectivity, the attitudes towards them and ways to achieve a greater appreciation and increase interaction with them. These objects are physical and psychological reminders of the past and what the African continent and the nations it contains have been through, who and what they have lost. During and after the colonial period, African nations were stripped of their riches without being given anything back.

African traditions and beliefs were often passed on from generation to generation through word of mouth. This method for the transference of knowledge, although it could be seen as a form of resistance to imperial oppression, was extremely vulnerable and made it easier for colonialists to erase African identities. Although some aspects of material culture remained after the trauma that was colonialism, evidence proves that African countries found it and are still finding it difficult to find their footing after the colonial masters, who had held control of their lives left and this can be seen in the reception of traditional culture. This is highlighted most especially in chapter two, which address the issues of tradition and culture in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Action needs to be taken to ensure that the history of the African continent and its people is not lost. Before everything is erased, restitution needs to take place. The past cannot define who Africa is as a continent, however, African countries cannot leave parts of their culture and heritage in the hands of others but instead, reimagine their history, culture, and beliefs and pass it on to future generations to ensure its sustainability. In order to understand what it means to be African within a contemporary African society, one needs to acknowledge that cultural connections have been made during and after colonialism and as such the African
identity is a representation of these interactions. Objects, when placed within an appropriate environment within the right context, are more powerful than when objects are simply afforded safety and appreciation because of its origins.

During the fight for independence, African countries and their populations managed to establish a united front and democratic systems. With the help of art and culture, they can build on this unity to move their nations forward. This requires the return of artefacts taken away during the centuries of slave trade and colonization, in order to recover their Africanness as part of the process of decolonization and Black renaissance. According to Ayi Kwei Amah, decolonization and Black renaissance begins with cultural awakening:

Such a cultural awakening, the prelude to great political and social improvements, shall be imminent when significant numbers of our population have enough real information of our history, philosophy and culture to understand our potential, so that we no longer labor under debilitating, cretinizing psychosocial caricatures, but see accurately what our past was made of, why that past has brought us to the present situation, and how, if we have the courage to seize the knowledge available to us and use it, we can create a better world.234

The current state of nationalism in Africa, more specifically sub-Saharan Africa, is considered weak in comparison to Western nationalism. This weak nationalism is commonly blamed on a host of problems in sub-Saharan Africa, including “protracted civil wars, chronic political instability, and economic underdevelopment.”235 Given these issues, how do nations retain their commitment to national integrity and nation-building? How can diverse populations

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be led towards integration and acceptance, recognizing their common patrimony? Amanda Lea Robinson argues convincingly that nation-building and national unification is not something that can be forced onto the population by the leaders of the nation. In order for national integrity and nation-building efforts to stick individuals must stay true to themselves and be as authentic to themselves as the possible can as they maintain their own sense of dignity, “It cannot be something imposed from above but must be found in the authentic lives of the people as they maintain their own sense of dignity.”  

Cultural diversity often raises questions about trust, tribalism, conflict and unity. There are some that believe that having several different ethnic groups within a country causes division and conflict and, in cases like Nigeria, civil wars. Partly because of the colonial partition, African states are among the most ethnically diverse in the world, with many ethnic groups split between different countries, producing a context in which national unity could be difficult to foster. As Amanda Lea Robinson observes: “The result of such diversity is that the citizens of most African states lack a common indigenous language, shared historical memories, or similar cultural traditions—the classic building blocks of a coherent national identity.”  

Colonialism is thought to have led to an increase in unification and national identity among the African states. This is because the nation’s populations felt united and connected through their anticolonial struggles. The groups that spearheaded the anticolonial cause needed something that would unify the people and give them the motivation to fight their oppressors. “These anticolonial campaigns

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often exploited a national rhetoric to unify individuals from different cultural groups against a common enemy.”

While strong ethnic attachment is not incompatible with national identification, national integration requires that loyalty to the territorial nation supersede subnational ethnic loyalties. Amanda Lea Robinson’s research hypothesizes that when a country has multiple cultural groups, if there is a dominant group present it may threaten the stability of smaller ethnic groups as there is the fear that national integration may ultimately lead to cultural assimilation into the larger group. For example, Robinson attributes Tanzania’s nationalism success to its lack of a dominant ethnic group which means that there is little to no chance of acrimony arising from the fear of minority groups being assimilated by majority and their culture and language erased. She further concludes that there is no evidence to support the theory that ethnic diversity is detrimental to national integration in Africa, and her results suggest that ethnic homogeneity causes more harm to nation-building. Segregation of ethnic groups has negative effects on a nation’s diversity and the trust between ethnic groups. “National diversity per se does not undermine interethnic trust, but that diversity in combination with segregation is associated with greater ethnic trust discrimination.” In order for nations to exist in relative peace there needs to be an acceptance and trust between all ethnic groups.

Robinson does emphasize that, in spite of the varying cultures of traditional societies, Africans have similar dominant traits within their belief systems and have similar value systems. There is, however, an element of uniqueness within each culture, referred to as cultural variation,

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238 Ibid., 717.
239 Ibid., 729.
differentiating each of them from other cultures around the world. Although most of the readings used for this paper are related to the development of Pan-Africanism, the concept applies to the individual nation states that were created as a result of the “Scramble for Africa.” Philosophers and critics suggest solutions that work both at a national and continental level. They are pushing for a unified continent but, in my opinion, for that to happen, there should first be unity within the individual nations without erasing the identity of the nation’s citizens. Unified nations and a unified continent ensure social and economic development within the nations and the continent, as well as promotes peace between nations. Each country can be seen as miniature versions of the unified continent that Pan-Africanists are trying to create. Ayi Kwei Armah believes that Africans need to wake up from the spell they have been placed under, where they believe that for Africa to progress into modernity, she needs to adopt Western rationality. Instead, this awakening will happen if Africans retrieve their “suppressed ability to conceive of our wholeness in both spatial and temporal terms; that we can begin doing this by articulating our dismembered society and remembering our suppressed history, philosophy, culture, science, and arts.”

A promotion of African culture must occur from the simplest institutions to the most complex and must be an objective that is carried out in everyday life. In order for this to happen the state must have at its disposal specially trained professionals and people who have knowledge about and can “affirm the value of African symbols, rituals, scripts, and so forth that enrich the lives of the people and bring Africans together as one nation.” Asante’s examination of the current state of disunity within countries that were products of the Berlin

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243 Asante, “Afrocentricity and the Argument for Civic Commitment,” 124
Conference, leads him to the conclusion that the disunity is a result of the “lack of proper appreciation of common objectives and consequently the minimizing of the roles of others.”

The motivation for juridical and political systems should be the protection of the African peoples’ dignity.

The African people must form an attachment to the country and the cultures, histories and traditions. They must know about their history and learn about it from an Afrocentric perspective rather than from a European perspective. This involves teaching the collective history of the African people. In addition, there should be an active appreciation of, and fight for, African cultural elements both past and present. This includes the visual and performing arts, music, education, science, and literature. Asante believes that the project of culture demands interrogating the past from an Afrocentric perspective. “We must not be stuck in the past, but we must not forget the past; we must use it as a resource to ensure civic commitment and to build our civil society.” Asante believes that educators need to refer to “the most ancient documents as well as the epics, myths, and narratives of Africa to discover the wisdom that we have inherited.” This does not mean that foreign and other sources are not useful or will not be effective, but it will ensure that Africans first turn to their own thinkers and philosophers and gain knowledge and understanding from the African perspective in order to utilize that knowledge in the world.

Museums play an essential role in the preservation and education of artefacts and heritage of cultures. There is unfortunately a low appreciation for the arts within Africa. The historian Z.

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244 Ibid.
245 Ibid., 125-126.
246 Ibid., 126.
247 Ibid.
S. Strother addresses the fact that the arts in Africa do not have the same reception or audiences as the arts in the West. The tendency to see art in the context of specific ethnicities within Africa has prevented the successful cultivation of supporters of the arts on the African continent. If a minority ethnic group is responsible for sculptures celebrated within the art world, is it justified for “a national museum to spend precious resources glorifying a handful of ethnic groups?”

There is also the fact that some of the sculptures that are within Western collections were religious icons and, due to the current state of religion on the continent, their very existence is controversial. Since the 1910s, for reasons tied to the imposition of Christian monotheism as well as other factors, there have been iconoclastic movements in West and Central Africa, and such iconoclasm continues in the present.

There is an ethical imperative for European museums to return these objects back to their rightful owners. These artefacts represent the loss of national and personal identity and cultural heritage, and their potential contribution to African economies through artistic tourism.

But this raises its own problems, as certain kinds of objects have been relegated to “traditional imagery” and therefore become unacceptable for Christians or Muslims to associate with. The various religions have also caused a divide within these countries that is difficult to breach and challenges peaceful co-existence, as noted in the case study of Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga in Chapter Two. James Cuno defines cultural property as a political construct. It is presumed to have special meaning to the nations that claim it, a part of them to which they maintain an emotional attachment. They are objects central to their identity. Cuno does not

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believe that this applies to antiquities as they are objects that are products of cultures no longer extant and of a different type than the modern national cultures of the nation’s claiming them. 

“What is the relationship between, say, modern Egypt and the antiquities that were part of the land’s Pharaonic past? The people of modern-day Cairo do not speak the language of the ancient Egyptians, do not practice their religion, do not make their art, wear their dress, eat their food, or play their music, and they do not adhere to the same kinds of laws or form of government the ancient Egyptians did.”

In a similar way, objects associated with African traditional religion are not readily or willingly accepted by current citizens who identify as Christian or Islamic. The restitution requests may be seen and criticized as neo-pagan or like in Egypt, could create tension between the present and an “imagined, descendent relationship” with the past. There are some who would like to forget certain aspects of history or refuse to associate or even acknowledge a part of history. Like Eddy Kamuanga Illunga’s mother, there are other Africans who associate traditional objects with witchcraft or paganism and, as such, refuse to g these objects’ cultural importance. This causes a divide within the nations as there are people who have no prejudice or judgement against these objects and those who do. How do you marry these two viewpoints to ensure that a full and contextualized history is presented without offending any group?

The restituted works offer an opportunity for new narratives about African history and culture to be written and discussed, and the creation of new ways to see the future. The works that remain in foreign museums are a testament to the brutal history of colonization, exploitation, and coercion and their presence within the countries responsible for this trauma makes it difficult

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for the decolonization process to occur, because these items are a constant reminder that colonial powers built their wealth upon the backs of countries they stole from and took advantage of. This also influences the contemporary world, and the way black people interact with each other and how they are treated by Others. The past obviously cannot be changed, but that is not what restitution is asking for. The request for restitution is meant to help restore to Africans some of the power they lost and to help create a future that is free from colonialism. These objects are a part of an inheritance of culture meant to be left for their African descendants. They are the source of individual and group identity, continuance, and solidarity. Cultural heritage implies a shared bond, a belonging to a community. It represents a history and an identity, a bond to the past, to the present and the future.

To understand why there is a call for these classical artefacts to be returned we need to acknowledge their importance to their countries of origin and their owners. Prott and O’Keefe define cultural heritage as “manifestations of human life which represent a particular view of life and witness the history and validity of that view.” Cultural heritage acts as a guide in one’s daily life. As Prott and O’Keefe highlight, heritage offers a look into what was worn, eaten, and how people behaved at a particular time. Cultural heritage influences one’s current values, practices, and preferences. Clothes, food, songs, stories, and actions are all susceptible to heritage. Cultural heritage is embedded in what we think, say, and do and has a starring role in the creation of communities, regions, and nations. The preservation of cultural heritage represents the essential need to preserve information and cultural transmission. As the embodiment of (imagined) identities and cultures, and their pasts, heritage ties the immaterial to

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the material, a (usable) past to a present, and 'having culture' to the possession of cultural
artefacts (or 'cultural property'), often in the form of monuments, historical sites, landscapes, and
museum collections.253

According to Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New
Relational Ethics written by Senegalese academic and writer Felwine Sarr and French art
historian Bénédicte Savoy published in November 2018, the gesture of restitution has very
serious connotations. It is the recognition that there is an illegitimate claim on property that was
owned by another no matter the amount of time that has passed.254 “As a consequence, the act of
restitution attempts to put things back in order, into proper harmony.”255 To call for restitution is
to call for justice, or for a rebalancing, or for the acceptance of restoration and reparation. These
cultural objects have also experienced some violence, be it them being remodeled or despoiled,
and as a result, their names, identities, significations, and functions, destroyed or altered.256 What
would it mean and what would happen if these objects that did not maintain their original
functions and importance were to be returned to the countries they were made in? How can these
objects be restituted while acknowledging the fact that “they had been captured and then
reshaped by a plurality of semantic, symbolic, and epistemological dispositives for more than a
century?”257 Returning these objects is not necessarily meant to place them within the exact same
environments to which they once belonged. It is about placing them within a context that
explains their importance and their source of value by seeing them as witnesses and a part of

255 Sarr and Savoy, Restitution of African Cultural Heritage, 29.
256 Ibid., 30.
257 Ibid.
history. They offer a snapshot into the past and how it could possibly have shaped the present. These objects, a part of the African heritage, document Africa's presence in the world. They offer an opportunity to celebrate culture on African soil, without the influence of outside voices.

Discussions of restitution and repatriation lead to debates and questions over the ownership of these collections, which in turn reveals how decolonization has been interpreted and received by those involved in the debate. Beurden defines the process of decolonization “as a drama of competing visions.”\textsuperscript{258} It can also be seen as a “cultural struggle over the symbols of a past, and an interpretation of the process as a political struggle for cultural sovereignty.”\textsuperscript{259} The call for the restitution of these objects highlights the role of cultural heritage in the imagination and creation of a cultural sovereignty and the role of heritage in the process of decolonization.\textsuperscript{260} Each institution involved in this debate has accorded different values to the cultural heritage in question. Heritage is useful either as an economic resource, a cultural artefact and/or as a national or international political tool.

The presence of these collections in these foreign museums sends out a certain message about cultural sovereignty in Africa. It was clear that possession of these collections played an important role in how sovereignty was imagined somewhere like in Congo by both the media and the political world.\textsuperscript{261} The return of these cultural resources to Congo meant that cultural sovereignty could be established which enabled the process of decolonization.\textsuperscript{262} Having a

\textsuperscript{258} Van Beurden, “The Art of (Re)possession”, 144.
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{262} Ibid., 149.
cultural heritage of collective ownership and in need of protecting creates a shared responsibility that fosters nationalism and unity.

Restitution seeks to procure these resources and gain control of them for the nation’s use and to disprove the notion that the nation is unable to represent itself through its own cultural heritage. Gaining control of one’s cultural heritage will help to destroy the continuation of colonial structures of representation and possession in a postcolonial setting, which Mobutu believes was the purpose of the Art of Congo traveling exhibition.263 Mobutu became aware of 200 objects, originating from the Congo, but was in the possession of the country’s former colonizer. During his UN speech in New York in 1973, Mobutu demanded these 200 objects back from Belgium. Former RMCA (Royal Museum for Central Africa) director Lucien Cahen sent 144 pieces from Tervuren, only one of which was exhibited in Art of the Congo. Ne Kuko's sculpture remained in Belgium.264 Africans regaining control of their stolen cultural artefacts conveys the message that the African ways of knowing and doing are equal to Western ways of knowing and doing, so there is no need for the Europeans to have control over African cultural resources.

Decolonization could be understood as “taking away the colonial,” the undoing of colonial elements and their impact on African cultures.265 It is a way to work through the trauma that was caused by colonization. Decolonization is also associated with people reclaiming and restoring their culture and traditions, their land, and relationships. It is linked to principles of inclusion and equity. Decolonizing entails unlearning and dismantling unjust practices.

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263 Ibid.
264 Ibid.
assumptions, and institutions – as well as persistent positive action to create and build alternative spaces, networks, and ways of knowing that transcend our inheritance. An example of decolonization in the arts can be seen through the actions of Mobutu’s regime in Zaire from 1965 to 1997. The regime believed that the creation of a “truly African museology,” disassociated from European traditions and adapted to “building a new culture combining traditions and progress,” was an essential component of decolonization. In October 1973, at the 28th meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York, Mobutu called for postcolonial cultural restitution, stating that Zaire needed these works back - the “works represent the hand and heart of the forefathers ... it is natural and just to restitute to these underdeveloped countries their beacons of light, their authentic images of a continued future.”

This belief is still present in the minds of the African countries and people who call for restitution. These works are a product of the hard work, creativity, tradition, history, and beliefs of the African forefathers. Possession of these works will be a major contribution to the decolonization debate and movement. Returning these works will show that these former Western colonial masters see that African countries are on equal footing with the West.

It is not simply a matter of returning these works back to their countries of origin. There are laws and beliefs that tie these objects to their current locations, and this further complicates the discussions and requests for restitution. The current “owners” of these artefacts offer various reasons as to why they are unable to return these objects. There are practical, professional, economic and legal issues dictating the safe return of these artefacts.

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[^267]: Ibid., 157.
One of the reasons for this refusal is often attributed to the excuse that Africans are unable to take care of these artefacts if they are returned. This excuse was attributed to the lack of African interest in traditional arts. This lack of interest could be attributed to the influence of colonization and Western thought, as Westerners pushed the idea that African traditions and culture were primitive and inferior. Beurden states that the perceived decline in the traditional arts was attributed not to colonial modernity but to, “Congolese inability to properly deal with the seductions of modernity,” which eventually led to the natives abandoning their traditions and culture. By placing the blame for the decline of tradition on the heads of the African population, the colonial powers place themselves above Africans and set themselves up as saviours and protectors of a history and culture that people are willing to throw away and disregard. What made these collections so important was both the financial value they had garnered at this point, which cast them as economic resources, and their symbolic value as representatives of an African precolonial heritage.

Lucien Cahen, who became director of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, in 1958, defended the institution's possessions of African art objects by first stating that the collections, as they existed, held universal scientific value. Cahen also argued that the museum’s collection was not obtained through improper or illegal means. Due to the fraudulent presence of objects of Congolese origin for sale on the New York art market during the time of Cahen’s directorship, he doubted that the newly independent country could safely protect their valuable collection of art. By portraying Congo as a state unable to protect its heritage, Cahen pushed the idea that Belgium and Tervuren were the best and safest place for

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268 Ibid., 145.
269 Ibid., 157.
these objects and should take on the role as cultural guardians of Congo’s heritage. There was hesitation on the part of Western museums and governments who believed that there is a lack of proper museum buildings in African countries, and who point to the failure of these countries to prevent the illegal trade of African art.

European laws and jurisprudence also dictate what the response and outcome to the call for restitution will be. French laws, for example, contain clauses that make it possible for the government to refuse the return of any objects of cultural heritage to Benin “by virtue of the inalienability of public French art collections.” This makes it impossible to access or remove the objects from the French museums. This protection of cultural goods creates an obstacle to responding to requests for restitution. In their report on the restitution of African cultural heritage, Sarr and Savoy point out that successive museums have turned down requests for restitution, pushing the argument that the works requested have long been integrated into the cultural heritage of the French nation, and as such it would be difficult to separate and remove them from their current locations. Why are these countries holding on so tightly to these objects? There is the obvious economic value these objects have, as well as the so-called preservation of ‘world heritage.’ But how about letting the descendants of the original owners protect their heritage first? The ability to do so is already demonstrated by aspects of culture which have persevered despite colonization. This debate about restitution reflects the continued power relations of colonial times and a persistent process of colonization.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{270}}\text{Ibid., 148.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{271}}\text{Ibid., 159.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{272}}\text{Sarr and Savoy, Restitution of African Cultural Heritage, 1.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{273}}\text{Ibid., 21.}\]
The ‘primitive’ arts and African cultural heritage became a part of the universal categories of art when colonial masters introduced African crafts and heritage onto the world stage, thereby changing Western world’s perception of African crafts and heritage. Beurden believes that the inclusion of these objects into the category of ‘world heritage’ negatively affected the call for repatriation and restitution as Western museums laid claims to these objects in the name of the protection of world heritage.274

There are conscious efforts being made to ensure that African and Black history and culture is preserved and represented at museums like the Musée de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire or IFAN Museum of African Arts, later named The Théodore Monod African Art Museum ("Musée Théodore Monod d'Art Africain) in Dakar, Senegal and the Museum of Black Civilizations (MBC) in Dakar, Senegal. It is acknowledged that the MBC has no collections of its own, but through collaborations with the Smithsonian, the Museum Quai Branly Jacques Chirac, in Paris, France, the Havre Museum and the Dakar-based Museum of African Art Théodore Monod, they borrow objects from these institutions.

There are several factors that need to be sorted out before the restitution and repatriation of African artefacts can occur within African nations from Western museums. It is not simply a matter of asking for these objects to be returned but involves a considerable amount of listening from both parties. The objects that are valued and cherished works of art in the West are often objects that are valued using a different criterion in their countries of origin. There is also the fact that when there are museums willing to restitute certain objects, they cannot predict how they will be received. Strother highlights some of the possible responses to restitution: “1) We want to

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rebury these items, 2) We don’t want these items back because we don’t want to rebury them. We want you to exhibit them so that our history is not forgotten, 3) You took it—you deal with the danger, 4) We’ve changed our religion and prefer to leave it with you, 5) or even: we would like you to make an archival 3-D scan to keep for us of the objects as we intend to dance with them.”

The reception of these of these objects may be varied as listed above. The meaning behind cultural images and how they have been received, separated, or incorporated into modern society is now strongly influenced by current religious and social beliefs. One needs to acknowledge the fact that there have been Africans who have fought to preserve and reimagine their artistic legacies just as there are Africans who want to separate themselves from the oppressive influence of the past and history to move forward with their future - like many avant-gardists, destruction could signify freeing themselves.

El Anatsui states that destruction is a necessary condition for rebirth, and he uses the chainsaw to evoke the devastation unleashed by colonialism. He claims that African artists try to reclaim the past. Many African artists who came of age following independence believe that there was too much loss of African heritage for them to adopt the European avant-gardist posture of “kill the father.” Instead, many heeded a call for their work to engage indigenous artistic practices. El Anatsui said that a now famous sculpture of his, “Chambers of Memory”, which was inspired by a Nok terracotta, had been returned to him by a Nigerian patron whose wife saw the work as a “graven image,” the making of which was forbidden by the second commandment (Exodus 20:4). While El Anatsui loved the idea that his work of his work being categorized as a “graven image,” Nigerian artist Bruce Onobrakpeya, once praised for his fusion of the past and present, had a large quantity of his works returned to him with his clients claiming that anything

with traditional roots was devilish. With the ever-changing minds of patrons and citizens it is difficult for artists to produce works that explore traditions and heritage.

In the 1990s, Sarró discovered that many Baga elders had embraced aniconism, a “passive rejection of images,” and had no intention of reintroducing masks or other sculptures. The elders saw these masks only as a “simulacrum” of what existed in an invisible “second reality.” “By rejecting these images and objects,” Sarró believes “they made sure that their religiosity could not be taken away from them.... [I]f you wanted to steal their molom [masquerades, etc.], you really would have to open their bellies.” The fervent rejection of these images by the elders placed them in conflict with the next generation of young Muslim men, who wished to reintroduce masquerades, albeit in modern forms and without covering their faces. These examples demonstrate that culture is dynamic and is always changing. For restitution to happen there needs to be discussions that take into consideration these changes and varying viewpoints, ensuring that the objects and their presence is not misunderstood or ignored.

In addition to the views of African nations, the question of restitution involves laws that need to be considered and reanalyzed. For instance, France and Britain must change their laws which designate stolen African artefacts as state property. James Cuno is against nationalist retentionist cultural property laws because according to him, they fail to “protect our ancient heritage, and they conspire against a greater understanding and appreciation of the world’s many, diverse cultures. No culture of any consequence is free of influences from other cultures. All

276 Ibid., 943.
277 Ibid., 933.
278 Ibid.
279 Ibid.
cultures are dynamic, mongrel creations, interrelated such that we all have a stake in their preservation.”280

Restitution is a situation where “the remains of the glorious past will be brought in new light, as the solid foundation of a glorious present and future.”281 These objects are a link to the past that the Africans have been unjustly separated from. There is, indeed, a political symbolic aspect to the request for restitution, in that there is a sense of cultural objects belonging to the people and that they contain the spirit of the African people and are an important part of their national identity. There is also the archaeological and scientific value these objects have, knowledge that is now more necessary than ever as Africa slowly loses its traditions, history, culture.

Arguments against restitution and national culture in this modern age raise the point that the national borders that exist today are a new and artificial construct and some cultures do not correspond with these new national borders. How, then, can cultural artefacts that belong to people who are no longer extant or in political power be cultural artefacts of these new nation states?282 An argument against restitution is that it is now harder to define and defend the boundaries of culture.283

Antiquities and artefacts are now being categorized as world heritage and world cultures. This enables the argument for antiquities to be exhibited in other museums around the world. There is nothing wrong with art traveling the world and introducing people of various

280 Cuno, Who Owns Antiquity, xxxv-xxxvi.
281 Ibid., xi.
282 Ibid., 11.
backgrounds to cultures and knowledge that is new and informative to them. But something can be said about exhibiting works with value that is an intrinsic part of the culture and way of life of the people. Certain artefacts are tied to certain aspects of history that cannot be parted from.

By separating these objects from their context, a certain aspect of the people’s history has been erased and has been rewritten in order to make up for this. “Why shouldn’t we want to see the art and antiquities of China, for example, also in New Delhi, Athens, Rome, or Mexico City (or London or Chicago, for that matter) with examples of comparable cultural artefacts from India, Greece, Rome, and Mesoamerica?” Cuno raises this question and although it is a reasonable question, it is difficult to answer without sounding selfish. Although education and information made accessible to the world is necessary, this knowledge is often presented and restricted to the Western and North American audience and those who can leave their countries to view these objects. These objects are directly associated in some way to the countries where these artefacts were found. Unfortunately there are different perceptions and receptions to these objects in different countries, and since that history has more of a direct association to their countries of origin, there should be more consideration taken to ensure that the descendants have access to this information to also learn and know.

Finally, after the artefacts are exported, in what sense can it be said that Africans have “lost” their culture? What, besides location, has changed? In 2012, John Henry Merryman used the examples of the relocation of the Aztec Calendar Stone to a museum in Paris, (currently in the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico) and the Parthenon Marbles to the British Museum in London to question the calls for restitution and cultural heritage national possession.

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284 Cuno, Whose Culture?, 15.
According to Merryman these objects did not stop honoring the Aztecs or the artistry of Greek sculptors and the culture just because they were moved. “To speak of the ‘loss of cultural heritage’ means one thing when cultural objects are destroyed or suppressed. It means something entirely different when what is “lost” is location within the national territory.”

To Merryman these objects are still the same and hold the same value. However, the emotional connection to these objects will likely be of a greater charge within the national territories. There are cases in which communities have a joint-stewardship agreements with museums that permits the occasional use of artefacts for important occasions.

Although the restitution of these looted artefacts is welcome, the African museums are more concerned with promoting local artistic production and circulating living treasures which continue to have ritual function and significance in their territories. The history of Africa cannot be reduced to the history of colonization. Ayodeji Rotinwa reports that African institutions moving away from the Western model of museums and are seeking new ways of displaying works that promote the involvement of the communities that created them. There is the belief that when the African artefacts were looted are returned, the objects would not necessarily end up in glass cases to be admired. The Palais de Lomé in Togo—an arts center opened in November 2019 in a former colonial governor’s palace with the exhibition Togo of the Kings—uses artefacts sourced exclusively from local chiefs and kings to tell the history of pre-colonial spiritual, political and royal power structures. The objects were not seen as objects of

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285 Ibid., 189.
286 Ibid., 151.
the past but as objects alive with energy and meaning and still useful to the communities they belong.  

All this proves that there needs to be serious discussions about restitution and its importance. Negotiations with groups who believe that there needs to be certain changes to treatment of these objects need to take place. Restitution is more than memorializing the past and its traumas, it is also a testament to the fact that the continent survived and is still around and that the people are survivors.

In many cases the objects, if returned, may be exposed to the elements or consumed or otherwise destroyed or, if protected, will be kept in secret places, available for viewing only by a select few and generally unavailable for scholarly purposes or public enjoyment. Should the objects be returned? How do you change the attitude toward traditional knowledge and religion to ensure that the heritage and objects are not shunned or presented with little to no information and that “culturally sensitive information” is included in exhibitions? How do you ensure that no offense is taken to showcasing objects from different cultures and religions? There needs to be an effort made from various stakeholders? to ensure the rebuilding and progression of African antique and contemporary art. Restitution and repatriation efforts must take place at the same time as the promotion of African culture and art is being established outside Western thought and judgement.

It is time to allow African youths to have access to their heritage, craftsmanship and artistic ingenuity. There is no need to display these artefacts in countries where African youth do not have the opportunity to visit them. These objects will help Africans remember who they are,

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where they are from and those who came before them. It is something to pass on to future
generations. Not knowing where you are from makes it difficult to know where you are going or
what your future should be like or look like. The African continent is a resource rich continent,
with its language, culture, food, music, and history. There needs to be an embracing of this
history and culture for people to truly understand who they have. Rather than focus on what the
Western and outside world has to offer, Africans should accept and celebrate what they have.
When they do that and see the value of their cultures, histories, and traditions, a sense of unity
and commonality would be achieved, because the population has embraced what it means to be a
citizen of a nation and an African and will strive to preserve better what they have.

Creating an understanding and appreciation for the works of art that existed in the
country will change people’s mindset about art and its value. To achieve this, investigation and
research of the population’s reactions to and feelings about art and how those thoughts can be
changed to ensure a lasting appreciation of art within the nation and the continent needs to be
conducted. There needs to be an educational program that introduces the younger generation to
the wonders of art. This could start at the primary school level, introducing these young people to
the arts through collaborations with museums and local craftsmen. Artists like Eddy Kamuanga
Ilunga and Aissa Dione address the ever-growing effects of globalization on African nations.
With globalization came many new introductions, positive improvements and negative effects on
the nation and culture within the African countries. Today culture and traditions are not restricted
to the countries in which they began. Globalization has provided a platform that spreads culture
all over the world.

The youths who are supposed to ensure the continuity of culture from one generation to
another consume large quantities of foreign media culture such as Western films, Western music,
Western television programs. It is feared that this massive exposure to foreign culture could distort and displace native cultures in developing countries, alienating their peoples from their own cultures. The situation is worsened by the quantity of foreign cultural products consumed by the people. This paper advises that people slow down the consumption and thirst for foreign products and life to salvage our culture, our identity, our pride.

People are not mere objects of cultural influences, but subjects who can reject or integrate culture. In this sense, people can make their own choices, regardless of external factors. But there needs to be an appreciation and understanding of the local cultures before they can be chosen. First, the government could promote the rebuilding of the country through the restoration of culture and traditions. Government needs to encourage the country’s population to do away with inferiority complex on anything that has to do with African culture and tradition. The people should know that they must celebrate and be proud of their own national values and cultural heritage. The crafts are not seen as a profitable venture as stated in the previous chapter. The government and citizens should promote educating the youth in these crafts and ensuring that there is better promotion of these professions to ensure their prosperity. Local weavers depend on tourists or global markets to bring in profit and even interest in the textiles since local interest has died down. There needs to be an improvement of domestic tourism and craft appreciation within the country. Restitution can also improve the state of domestic tourism.

Globalization has also given the opportunity for the revival and resurgence in culture by reintroducing and introducing people to aspects of their culture that had died down or were long forgotten.
Conclusion

The general aim of this thesis was to investigate the ways in which material objects and culture, using traditional textiles as case studies, relate to the creation and maintenance of a national identity. This meant identifying and recognizing contemporary African artists who use traditional woven textiles and wax print textiles to address and promote nationalist ideologies. In this thesis I have demonstrated the important role traditional textiles are playing in the nationalist projects of contemporary African artists. These artists use the traditional textiles as a means of communication and expression. My initial premise was to demonstrate the importance of tradition and culture to the development of nationalism which will in turn lead to the development of the nation and its people. My belief is that for Africans to build an interest in their nation and develop a sense of nationalism, material culture and the arts would play a major role in the successful creation of cultural commonality. I believe that objects can represent nations and that a study of the works of contemporary African artists will reveal the status of nationalism within the nation. Rather than focus on one country in Africa or one point of Africa, I introduced various artists from different countries on the African continent to show that the struggles for nationalism, cultural preservation and progress is similar, although at varying stages of success and decline. Each artist offered insight into how these countries are developing and growing and how the nationalist ideology and traditional and cultural continuation was going. I chose to use traditional woven textiles as the focus of my thesis because they are a part of material culture that have survived and therefore adopted various meanings, values and uses as time passed which is in part due to the iconic, symbolic, and indexical connections they have.

Most of the countries on the African continent experienced colonization and are still feeling the aftereffects of it to this day. I wanted to explore how African artists and on a more
general scale, the African population were approaching postcolonialism as well as the efforts and progress that had been made to move past colonialization.

In Chapter 1, I used the works of Ghanaian artist El Anatsui to investigate nationalism within Ghana. The Kente cloth is a cultural product of the Asante ethnic group of Ghana. This cloth, which is treated as an heirloom, has become a cloth for more than just the Asante people but also the entire population of Ghana. Its use has not been restricted to a specific ethnic group (Asante) and the nation has seemingly come to accept this cloth as being representative of a Ghanaian identity. This proved that it is possible to achieve a shared sense of commonality using objects. El Anatsui’s works explore how these textiles can be transformed and used as communicative devices. By taking it out of its traditional context Anatsui provides the opportunity for more meaning and value to be placed on the Kente cloth through the creation of his sculptures. El Anatsui’s Kente cloth shows the importance of Kente in Ghana and its relevance to the discussion of identity. The focus on Ghana was to examine a country that I believed had managed to establish a semblance of nationalism that promoted unity and development. The Kente cloth became synonymous with not only being Ghanaian but also an African. The uniformization of the Kente cloth amongst Ghanaians demonstrates the presence and the desire for nationalism within Ghana. The Kente cloth and El Anatsui’s works enabled me to explore the lasting effects of colonization on Ghana society and the efforts the country is making to move past the colonial trauma. This chapter also explores the consequences of globalization and Pan-Africanism on the value of traditional culture by following the changes to value and craftsmanship that take place due to modernization and location.

In Chapter 2, a case study on Congolese artist Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, addresses the current decline of tradition and culture within the Democratic Republic of Congo. Kamuanga
Ilunga presents images that reflect the nation’s thoughts on tradition and culture. The subjects of the paintings are solemn and often seem to desperately try to hold to the aspects of culture that is dying out. These representations supported my thesis as they demonstrated that there is a hunger for the preservation of culture, tradition, and cultural artefacts. Kamuanga Ilunga’s use of wax prints within his works led me to question his motives for using these cloths and not traditionally woven textiles like the famed Kuba cloth. Chapter 2 explored the decline and replacement of culture and tradition that seems to be the pattern within formerly colonized African countries. Kamuanga Ilunga explores colonization and tradition and their effects on the economic, political, and social identity of contemporary Democratic Republic of Congo. Kamuanga Ilunga demonstrates the effects of globalization and the acceptance of European practices on traditional and cultural heritage. Kamuanga Ilunga mourns the loss of tradition and the African consciousness and seeks to preserve them within his works. The paintings examine the impact of the legacy of colonization on contemporary Congolese society. Kamuanga Ilunga’s use of the mass-produced and mass-consumed wax print textiles highlights their contribution to the process of modernity and globalization in the DRC as well as becomes a testament to the deterioration and replacement of tradition. The chapter expands on the view that Western influences are erasing and replacing African traditions as mentioned in Chapter 1 about Ghana and the Kente cloth, but on a much larger scale.

Chapter 3 explored the theme of renewal and the revitalization of tradition and culture in a modern African country through the work of Senegalese artist Aissa Dione. Dione is one of the many artists that revived the use of the Manjak cloth in Senegal and has managed to establish it as more than a textile for clothing which is essential in a contemporary modern society that wants to break free from the restrictions of tradition. Aissa Dione has made it her mission to
revive Senegal’s traditional textile craftmanship and has done this by building a production that is 100 percent “Made in Senegal,” from the raw materials to the weavers. Dione has managed to produce a high-end brand underpinned by old cotton processing and weaving skills. Chapter 3 introduced arguments between Pan-Africanism and Afrocentricity to explore what was the most appropriate path tradition and culture could take in an ever-changing world where individual nations are culturally plural. Material objects often go through many stages and journeys and as such consist of a series of recontextualizations and interpretations through which different values and meanings are applied. Chapter 3 discusses how cultural and traditional authenticity can be retained within a modern society. Authentic weaving practices are a thing of the past and are carried into the present through traditions and practices. Are these textiles really carriers of national traditional authenticity or are they objectifications of traditions? The chapters all have in common is the question of authenticity, this can be found in areas where the commodification or mechanization of customs have become common place within the nation even if they are not necessarily national.

Once the importance of material culture had been established and argued out, the issue of restitution could not be ignored. Although textiles and artefacts may not seem to have much in common, the issue of restitution was necessary for this thesis as it introduced a new facet to the discussion on material culture. The previous chapters dealt with the loss of tradition and culture and how the African countries are trying to compensate for this loss that occurred because of colonization. The works that are being asked for are the works that were taken out of the country as spoils of war, looted, or taken during colonization. The possession of artefacts taken under these conditions could be considered as the continuation of colonization and can be seen as contributing the current state of culture within African countries as certain aspects of culture is
still missing. The pride that a nation of people feel is often linked to cultural property and heritage. Chapter 4 tackles the arguments for and against the restitution of African cultural property. Through political and morality lens, Chapter 4 gathered insights on how restitution could be beneficial or irrelevant to African nations. The question of ownership is raised – who do these objects belong to? What makes them a part of a nation’s heritage? If the textiles are a representation of the continuation of tradition and culture, then the artefacts in Western museums are a representation of the stagnation of culture and tradition within the African countries. The call for restitution also alludes to the fact that reproductions and semblances of nationalism are not enough to ensure pride, unity and nationalism. What is needed are the authentic cultural objects that would ensure pride and unification. Nationalism and the nation cannot and should not be reduced to reproductions. To reiterate, the traditional craftsmanship, physical properties, and the meanings derived from the objects and textiles are all related to the nation and nationalism. This thesis was meant to demonstrate that there is a lot of complexity attached to textiles and material culture.

A limitation I faced was being unable to interview citizens of these countries or personally see the state of tradition and culture within these countries. Further research needs to be undertaken to create ways through which culture and tradition can survive prosper on the domestic front and maintain its authenticity, value, importance, and dignity on the international front. What one can hope for and work towards is a situation where national authenticity, globalization, and modernization can co-exist in are less prescriptive and a more understanding world and eliminates disruptive and disrespectful iterations of traditions and the traditional.
Material culture embodies the ideas, symbols, and possibilities of the people. Be it political or social, nationalism cannot be discussed without making mention of the agency of objects.
Bibliography


