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Ohenmaa's Role In Ashante My Experience & View On Community

Michelle Castro

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OHENMAA'S ROLE IN ASHANTE

MY EXPERIENCE & VIEW ON COMMUNITY

MICHELLE CASTRO

FALL, 1999

S.I.T.

ADVISOR: NANA ABAYE BOATEN

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Introduction	ii
Methodology	1
PART I. Ohenmaa In Ashanti	
“Queenmother”, Is it the Title Appropriate?	3
Ohenmaa’s Traditional Role In Ashanti	5
Yaa Asantewaa	7
Changes in Tradition	9
Stool mother: A Spiritual Role	11
Queenmother’s Association	12
PART II. Visual Component: Community	
Prelude	14
Last thought for closing photographs	27
Symbolism of Kente Photographs	30
Conclusion	31

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Finally, I am going to thank my friend Kofi Samuel Bakame for being there for me, and acting as my translator.

Abstract

My writing touches upon the different roles of Queenmothers. By no means is it an in-depth look into her role in different regions of Ghana, but concentrates on her spiritual, traditional role & presently changing role in Ashanti. A chapter is also given to Yaa Asantewaa. The second component of my project consists of photographs that convey the symbolism of unity and show how interconnected the community is to the institution of Ashanti Chieftaincy on an everyday basis.

Introduction

Women constitute the majority of the world, participate in not only waged labor, but “work” as wives, mothers, maintainers of home (traditionally), and are worldly dominated and denied recognition by males for everything they accomplish.

My interest in the role of Queenmothers grew from the social / political role she plays within a traditional male dominated society. The more time I spent in Ghana, the more I began changing my individualistic feminist perspective as an outsider and trying to learn how to form a communal perspective for myself. As the readers flip through and breathe in my words I would like to remind them not to take them religiously, but to appreciate them as one person’s attempt to maximize her experience in Ghana.

Methodology

When I first set out to research “Queenmotherhood”, it was to inquire about her historical / traditional / present / changing role within her community. Most of the scholarship on women’s issues in Africa have been written either in a format criticizing the existing patriarchy, or examining female oppression through, “the institution of marriage with its related issues of bride – wealth, child – marriage, polygamy, widowhood and inheritance of property, high fertility and puberty rites with specific reference to female circumcision.”¹ I wanted to be really careful, that I was aware of the dangers of my American perspective at all times, when interacting and interviewing people during my fieldwork. These are some of the questions I asked while in Komenda, Ejisu, & Kumasi:

1. Explain to me the role you play within your community.
2. How has your role changed historically?
3. How has the presence of Western formal education affected your role?
4. What preparation is taken for festivals? Nobility rites?
5. What is the Queen Mothers Association (Q.M.A.)?
6. Are there any difficulties in interacting with other Queenmothers?
7. Can Queenmothers ever be destooled?
8. What are your responsibilities when interacting with Elders & Chiefs?
9. What is your everyday life like apart from your responsibilities as a Queenmothers?
10. What does the community expect / demand from you?
11. Do you consider yourself as someone working for “women’s development”?
12. How is a Queemother supposed to dress?
13. Can you tell me about Yaa Asantewaa & how you educate the community through oral tradition about the role she played in the battle of 1900?
14. Is there any difference in being a Queenmother in Ashanti compared to other regions?
15. Who selects the Queenmother?
16. Is the Queenmother’s role taken less seriously as it was in the past?
17. What changes need to occur to preserve or improve her position?
18. When was the Q. M. A. founded in Kwabre district?

¹ Dolphyne, Florence Abena *The Emancipation of Women, An African Perspective*. Ghana Universities Press. Accra 1991.

19. Where are complaints taken?

When I set out for the visual component of my project, I sought to photograph images that would convey the mood of community; to show how interconnected people in the community are to the institution of Chieftaincy and how important it is to maintain unity. I took photographs in Bonwire, Anwiaa carving village, Ntonso and Asafo market in Kumasi.

Searching for secondary sources was difficult. I visited Manhyia Palace and the Institute of African Studies Archives in Kumasi and found that nothing had been written. The only scholar that I could find that has written on Queenmothers was my advisor Nana Abaye Boaten.

“Queenmother”: Is the title appropriate?

In our everyday lives we should be careful with the words we choose to communicate with, because it may have negative psychological effects. For example, let’s take the two derogatory terms –Negro (originating from the Spanish word Negro that means black object), and mulatto (originating from the Spanish word mula meaning donkey) these terms were used acceptingly for decades in the U.S. by African Americans unaware of their origin or dehumanizing purposes. One may ask what does this have to do with the term queenmother, but it is very relevant. It relates because it shows how a community of people unconsciously used the coloniser’s language to dehumanize and misinterpret their identity. As an outsider coming from an education system that has been colonized by European scholarship I want to be careful not to do the same.

One Ghanaian scholar who has written on this topic is Nana Abayie Boaten, he mentions terms that have been used to identify this woman and questions their authenticity. He mentions the terms Ohenmaa, Queenmother, and Stoolmother, and teaches us, “ This is the first time any scholar has used this term: “Stoolmother” in place of Queenmother.” I consider this term appropriate since the English word Queenmother has a different connotation. While the Queenmother in Western / Eastern monarchies are not rulers and are invariably mothers to the Queen or King in our context she is a ruler and a mother (traditionally) to the Chief.

Here she rules with the Chief especially taking care of the female population under her.”² I feel the term Stoolmother is appropriate in that it includes an essential spiritual role that (I will dwell on in a later chapter) keeps her in contact with tradition – it respects the stool, which is the keeper of the soul of the ancestors and the unity of the village.³ For the purpose of not devaluing the institution of chieftancy I will use that term interchangeably with Ohenmaa

² Boaten, Nana Abaye, *THE CHANGING ROLE OF QUEENMOTHERS IN THE AKAN POLITY*”. Institute of African Studies Research Review New Series” Vol. 8, Nos. 1 & 2 1992. Univ. of Ghana Legon. P. 97

because, “The Akan word for the term Queenmother was Ohenmaa. This word was the shortened form of the mother of a chief; ohene (chief) maame (mother) ... (others had explained the word simply as the female ruler).⁴

Ohenmaa's Traditional Role In Ashanti

Historically, the Ohenmaa's role can be spoken of thus;

“Though described as the mother of the Chief, she is more often his sister; constitutionally she is regarded as his mother. She is expected to advise the Chief about his conduct and may scold and reprimand him in a way not permitted to his councilors. When a Chief's Stool is vacant the Queen-Mother proposes his successor; she is regarded as the authority on kinship relations in the royal lineage... she simply advises on his eligibility from the point of view of kinship and character.

...The Queen-Mother is consulted on matrimonial affairs within the royal lineage. She has her own stool, Elders and Spokesmen and she hears 'household' cases (afisem), usually matrimonial cases and disputes between members of the royal household. She used to be a member of the Chief's court and received her share of court fines and fees.

The Queen-Mother does not control all the women of the state; every lineage has its own Senior Woman (Obaapanyin), responsible for the women of the lineage and concerned with their marriages and divorces. But in the old days, when the men had gone to war, the Queen-Mother, as head of the royal lineage, superintending the rites and dirges of the women praying for victory and the safe return of the men.”⁵

Another important role the Queenmother would play would be in the Nubility Rites (*Kyema*). She would be responsible for examining a young woman's breasts who had just begun menstruating to conclude if she had ever been pregnant. Failure to restrain from sexual activity before the rites of passage would force the Queenmother to impose kyiriba rites on the offenders.⁶

As I will show in the forthcoming chapter, with the dynamism of culture, the Queenmother's traditional role has changed in many aspects.

⁵ Sarpong, Peter, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti*. 1977 Ghana Publishing Corporation. P.13

⁶ Ibid. p. 13

Yaa Asantewaa

We often learn about female Icons in history but don't connect them to sociological lineage. This is what drew me to visit Ejisu and speak with the famous Queenmother. Yaa Asantewaa's succession. First I would like to inform unaware readers of this one woman's history Kwame Nsiah's words:

Whenever the incumbent king fails to exercise his kingly powers in one way or the other, the Queen has the right of her position to stand in (to exercise that singular authority) as a means to protect the family's honour and common property with Asante, royal duties are never left unattended to. The Queenmother does it herself or her appointee is charged to do it, and expeditiously.

This was the example of Yaa Asantewaa, the Queenmother of Ejisu who had that rare privilege to declare war with the British by challenging Governor Hodgson's claim to the Golden Stool. King Prempeh I, the Asantehene was then in exile, together with his father and mother who was then the Asantehemaa. Asante was without her King and her Queenmother and most of the other chiefs including the chief of Ejisu.

The prospect of suffering exile was not endearing enough to most of the rest of the Asante chiefs who at the time did not see any hope of victory in another war with the British. A great number of them, as a result, kept mute. But not Nana Yaa Asantewaa who shot forward with the courage she could muster to make it impossible for Governor Hodgson to take her stool away, the soul of Asanteman, She called upon all the willing chiefs to stand up and fight. She suffered exile subsequently. Yaa Asantewaa in that rare position had been king (of the golden Stool) more or less, by showing the way to the battle fields of the 1900 war.⁷

When I arrived in Ejisu, I was greeted by members of Yaa Asantewaa's royal family lineage. Nana Efia Tweneboa agreed to speak to me. She told me that Yaa Asantewaa had given birth to one daughter. Ama Serwa, who bore 11 children. Out of these children one was her mother, Nana Kosi Nkrumah.⁸

As Kofi Samuel translated her Twi into English, this is what I was told about Yaa Asantewaa:

At the time we were worshipping white people. They were cheating us. They came & took Prempeh I away and at that time they took all the great kings away. So after that they came back to take the stool away. They took the chief of Ejisu away. So because of that Yaa Asantewaa became a Queenmother and a chief at the same time. Yaa Asantewaa became very mad at white people.

⁷ Nsiah, Kwame, "The Woman in Traditional Asante" *The Ghanaian Chronicle* . Wed, April 14, 1999

⁸ Ejisu Nov. 10th. Interview with Nana Efia Tweneboa

The white man was very serious about taking away our stool. So because of that Yaa Asantewaa told the people not to feed the soldiers. The soldiers are helping the white people take the stool away and after that a fight followed between Ashanti and white people. They fought for 9 months. Someone from Ashanti went to white people and told them how we shot our guns. They knew the plan; so because of that Yaa Asantewaa ran away. She went into hiding and came out when white people were leaving...⁹

I felt it necessary to include both the primary interview and a historical write up of Yaa Asantewaa's famous story because it shows a personal and impersonal telling of her story. Hearing her family talk about her story of resistance gave life to her. It is important to me because it connects history to, not only the present lives of members of the Ashanti community but to all people who don't see the relevance of history to their present lives.

⁹ Ibid

Changes in Tradition

Presently with the presence of western education and the dynamism of culture, the role of the Ohenmaa has changed in many ways.

In the past the Ohenmaa's appearance was supposed to be distinct from the rest of her community. No earrings were to be worn and her hair would be cut the following day after enstoolment; she would wear her hair in the "dasikran" style at all times. Now the customs are not so strictly followed except by the older Ohenmaa's. Traditionally, she would stay within her community. She did not go out and earn wages. Now Ohenmaa's engage in all fields of work ranging from teachers to working in their shops, aside from their communal responsibilities.

When I interviewed Nana Yaa Akyaa, Ohenmaa of Asonomaso Traditional Area (includes villages of Safo & Nkawate) and I asked if nubility rites were still practiced I was told, "I have only done 1 rite. With the schools, girls do not want their breasts inspected."¹⁰ Because the nobility rites have ceased to be practiced, "The incidence of adultery, promiscuity and abortion, Ashanti will say, has surged to proportions unimaginable in the traditional system... It looks as though they have completely lost their traditional control over their daughters, who are now in touch with the realities of sex life long before they were in the past."¹¹

When I asked what was one thing she saw wrong with some of the Ohenmaa's today I was told, that, "traditionally only a woman of at least 40 years could be a Queenmother. Now you find some as young as 12. It was believed that a woman of old age could best suit the role because she was done caring for her children and husband. Now there are 10, 12 years olds, the people that enstool them think they look cute"¹² she told me that this all started about 25 years ago, before that no one younger than sixty was a Queenmother.¹³ I found this disturbing because if traditionally an Ohenmaa was supposed to be a role model and advisor to her female community...how can a child be wise enough to rule, especially in the practicing of traditions? For example, one tradition that seems unimaginable for a child to implement would be, "If a baby dies, the Queenmother is responsible for feeding the mother yam. She must not chew it."¹⁴ This act that brings the Ohenmaa together with women in her community shows that she is giving emotional support and encouragement that "the mother will eat again" (life will go on, one will bear more children).¹⁵ Now seeing the significance of this act, how can one imagine a child taking on this important role?

¹⁰

¹¹ Sarpong, Peter. *Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*. Ghana Publishing Corporation P. 13

¹² Kumasi. Interview with Nana Yaa Akyaa, Ohenmaa of Asonomaso. Sat. Nov. 12th 1999

¹³

¹⁴ Ibid

Stoolmother; A Spiritual Role

One important ritual the Stoolmother is responsible for is the celebration of Akwasidae. Akwasidae (different from the festival) comes around every 40 days on a Sunday. When it arrives the Stoolmother is responsible to go to her Nkonuafieso (stool house), with the stools amongst her she takes part in calling upon and respecting her predecessors that have passed on.¹⁶

Nana Akyaa gave me the privilege of listening to her explain this important ritual:

On Akwasidae, we purify the stools. I will make the stools stand up. I pour my schnapps and I pray. I pray to the ancestors. I raise my cup of wine to God and then I pour a little for my ancestors so they can drink until I finish. In the Afternoon I call on the ancestors so they can eat. I call on one by one and pour water on the floor... I say come and wash your hands and then I tell them to come eat. But before I pour wine and food, I lower my cloth just above my chest and slip off my right sandal to show respect before I serve them. I put 7 small samples of food aside, one for each of the Queenmothers before me, then I take some food and throw it outside for those that have never been on the stool. Around 2 o' clock after they have eaten and drunken wine, I put the stools back on their sides; If I need to pray for something urgent than I keep them standing up for another 40 days''¹⁷

Hearing her speak these proud words, showed me an important essential tradition...the maintaining of royal family tree.

¹⁶ Kumasi. Interview with Nana Yaa Akyaa, Ohenmaa of Asonmaso. Sat. Nov. 12th 1999

¹⁷

Queenmothers Association

The Queenmothers Association of Kwabre District was founded on October of 1981. This district consists of 87 Ohenmaa's of the greater Ashanti region. Its purpose can be best introduced with the proverb...*Tikoro Nko Agyina*¹⁸ (2 heads are better than one). The current chairperson is Ohenmaa, Nana Akya Afriyie Siakwas. Meetings are scheduled every first Tuesday of the month.

On Tuesday, November 16th I sat in on their discussion where, Nana Dufie secretary and Ohenmaa of Bofroduri was documenting all issues being discussed. Many issues that affected each woman's community were mentioned:

In one community, an Ohenmaa paid a visit to the school in her community. She notices that the students need more pens. "Some students can't pay the fees. The parents need jobs to take care of their children. No rain, no crops; since they can't sell any crops, they can't pay fees for children to learn."¹⁹

Another Ohenmaa stated, "I went to Kumasi, when I returned I noticed 2 children wearing school uniforms without sitting in classroom and I asked them why they weren't in school. One child said that his mother was not home so he had no food. He can't learn without food. The other one said... he needs books for school. So I asked how much is the book and I gave him 5,000 cedis and the other child 500 cedis for food. I told them they should always go to school and then I called on the parents to come to my home". One other issue affecting a community was one Ohenmaa that reported that, 'last time she called the teachers in her village together, because parents reported to her that teachers don't come to school early. I called the parents and teachers together. The parents said that the teachers are always late and students will sit in classroom without any adult. Teachers said that they live in Kumasi, so it is very difficult to get there on time because there is only one car taking people back and forth from village to Kumasi.'²⁰ One solution that had was suggested by other Ohenmaa's was for her to have a teacher live in the village. She replied that she had one stay, but it only lasted 2 weeks because the teacher complained that there was no electricity and mosquitoes were plentiful... so she went back to Kumasi.²¹

¹⁸ Bonwire. Interview with Charles Kwabena Boateng. Mon. Nov. 15th 1999

¹⁹ Interview with Anonymous Ohenmaa. Tuesday. November 16th 1999

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

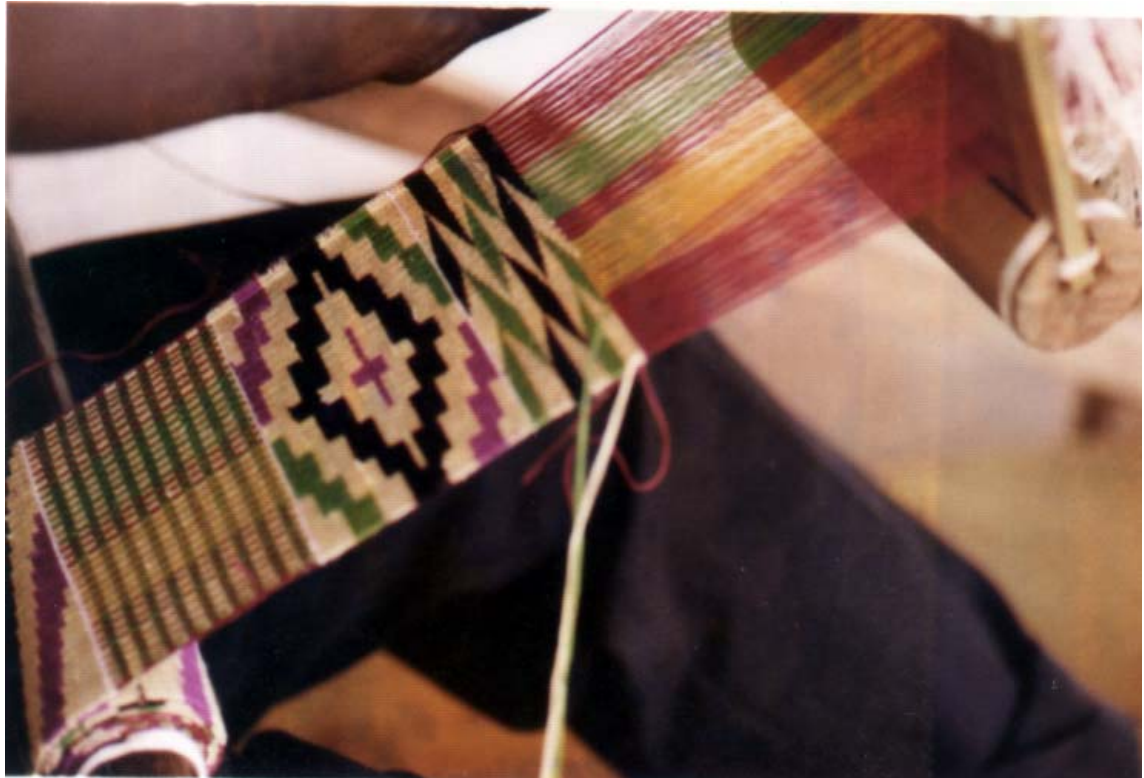
These were just a few of the problems within communities discussed. Others that came up were ideas on how to raise money to bring electricity to some villages, buying trash bins, plans on what to do for the orphan children on Christmas and communal labor on keeping their villages clean, improving the school building. The District secretary...Opaque Foveae, took all Complaints. He delivers the appropriate ones to governmental officials in hope that some form of aid will be allocated.

Part II; Prelude

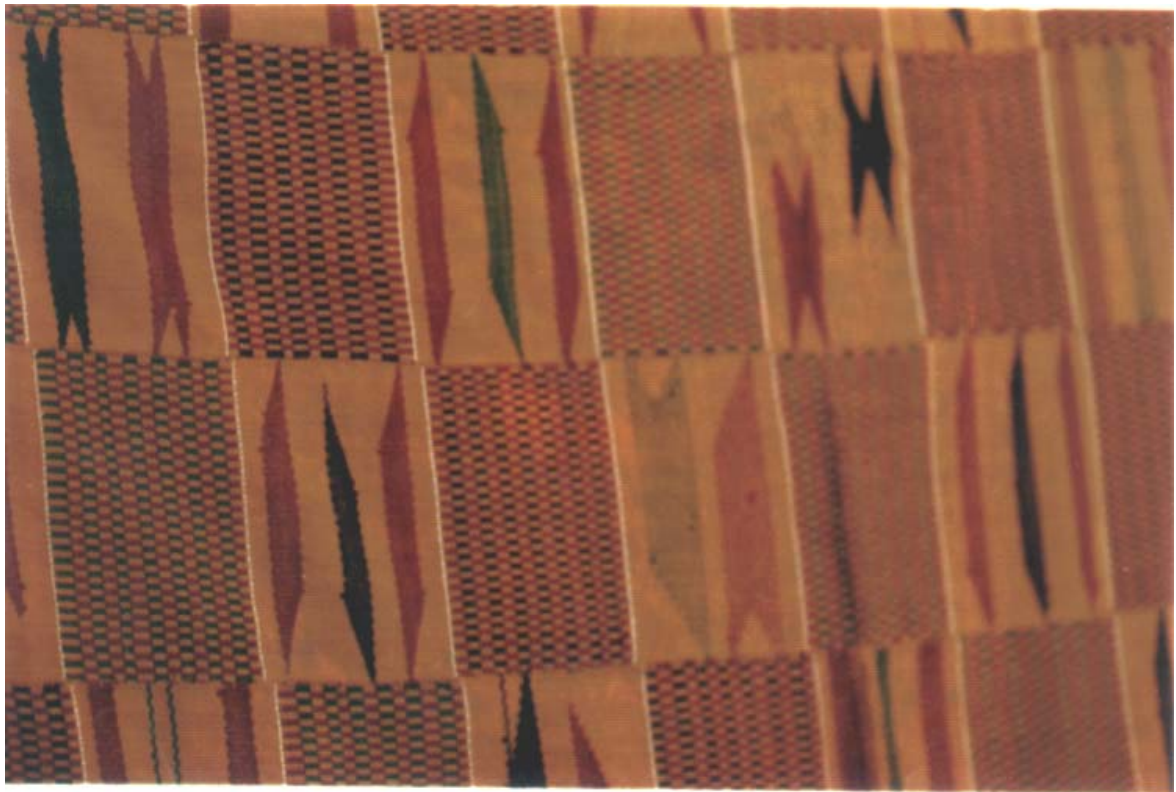
For me to click on the shutter of my camera and know that a photograph has been shot is to permanently record a thought, that I have not forgotten to write down or has been inevitably discarded by another. I've spent the last 3½ months in Ghana recording my life... my experiences. These are visual images that are personally significant and convey a sense of me in the eye of the beholder. I've been privileged to visit villages the world and many Ghanaians will never see. What follows are a few that feed the meaning of community.





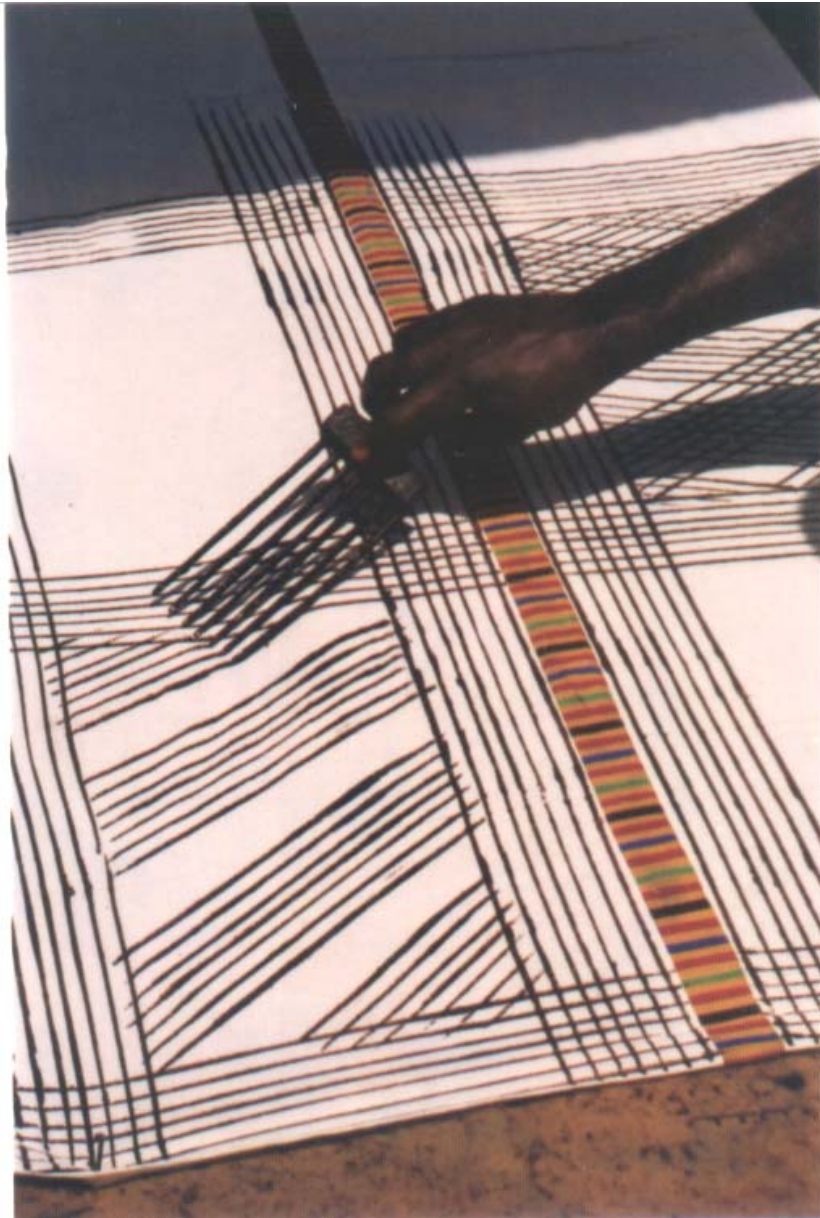












“At the then just discovered seventeenth-century African burial ground in lower Manhattan...bones here are the remains of the first generations of Africans New Amsterdam,...For six months I spent several days a week visiting this cemetery, helping to document in photographs the unearthed remains. Here I was able to see for myself a few beads that had covered wrists and waists at death and an occasional seashell – surely currency for the afterworld

---Chester Higgins Jr.²²

²² Higgins, Chester. *Feeling the Spirit: Searching the World for the people of Africa*. Bantam Books 1994.



Symbolism of Kente Photographs

- I. “Yaa Asantewaa” – designed in memory of Yaa Asantewaa.
- II. “*Apremo*” – motif named after boom of gun; “symbol of defence and history of Asante resistance against European colonial wars.”²³
- III. “*Fahia Kotwere Agyeman*” – motif dedicated to powerful Queenmother of Mampong; means “when you are poor go see Nana Agyeman.”²⁴ Symbolises benevolence.
- IV. “*Sika futuro*” - motif; “In our land there is gold” (considered royalty kente)²⁵

²³ Interview with Charles Kwabena Boateng. Bowire. Prince of Peace Kente

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that during my fieldwork I felt like the sum of what would be graded had to be presented as an argument. But the end of the allotted time, I realized that what mattered to me was the experiences I was having which had nothing to do with analyzing anything.

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