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Why Do You Dress Me in Borrowed Robes?¹

The Role of *Kente* Cloth at Skidmore College

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“In my opinion, this is all about us. It’s a celebration of us becoming adults...No one forced me to do anything over the past four years...I may have done it all at Skidmore, but I can’t forget who made me this way. I was African American before I came here and I’ll be African American when I leave...I’m going to celebrate my people when I walk across the stage wearing *kente* at graduation.”

Student, Skidmore Class of 2014

“It’s a nice thought, but at the same time, it’s singling students out because of how they look.”

Student, Skidmore Class of 2015

***** This project was made possible through the help of many Skidmore students. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, I have removed the students’ names in order for this paper to serve as an example of an honors-earning project. In its original form, this paper relied heavily on the names of these students, so please excuse any awkward passages and edited bibliography in this more public form of my paper and, most importantly, good luck with your own exciting projects and papers!**

¹ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I, iii.

On May 17th 2014, many graduating seniors at Skidmore will be wearing a colorful strip of cloth known as *kente*, a cloth originally from Ghana, at commencement to celebrate their ethnic, racial, or national identities and to highlight the diversity of the graduating class at large.² The origins of this cloth can be traced to the Asante of Ghana in West Africa for whom *kente* has long served as bodily markers of royalty and high status. Far from static, *kente* has always undergone changes both visually and in its symbolic meaning in Ghana. *Kente's* role at Skidmore reflects its ability to adapt and changing, taking on more meaning each time it is ingested by a society or culture.

This paper first looks at *kente* as a West African textile tradition and explores its cultural and historical significance for the Asante people. After contextualizing *kente*, it then highlights *kente's* journey to the United States and its immersion into the academic sphere. Finally, the discussion focuses on the role that *kente* plays at Skidmore College as seen through the voices of Skidmore students, staff, and administration as they comment on the cloth and its meaning. *Kente's* role at Skidmore reveals that the presence of *kente* at Skidmore's commencement does not go without conflicting feelings, as the above quotations suggest. It also considers its related tensions and controversies at Skidmore in light of the college's mission to hold diversity goals above the necessity of a united student body. Ultimately, the Skidmore community does not commit to a unanimous understanding or feeling for the *kente* tradition, but the *kente* stoles offer an interesting look at the textile's overarching trajectory of development and change and may offer a unique way for the Skidmore community to begin including art in diversity dialogues on campus.

² Interview with Mariel Martin, Conducted at Skidmore College, March 26, 2014.

Kente in Ghana

Kente originates from the Asante (and Ewe)³ of Ghana and although it is difficult to understand the exact date that Asante artisans began weaving the first examples of *kente* cloth, archeological evidence points to the tenth century as an approximate date of origin.⁴ Asante weavers, always male, would weave long, skinny strips of cloth ranging from four to five inches in width on a multi-heddle loom that they then sew them together to create larger wrappers. Men would wear them toga-style and women, as lower-body wrappers (Figure 1).⁵

Traditionally, and still today, *kente* is regarded as the official attire of royalty (kings and chiefs) as a marker of power, dignity, and greatness. An image of an Asante Chief exemplifies the king's importance and royal presence as he sits proudly in his stately regalia (Figure 2), with his feet elevated to show his distance from the worldly realm. Except for the customary right shoulder, his entire body is gloriously shrouded in brightly covered *kente*.⁶

It is the Asante custom to assign the patterns proverbial meanings reinforcing good qualities of leadership. An example of this is the *kente* bearing the name "If you climb a good tree, you get a push" (Figure 3). In a culture that views the tree as a metaphor for divine leadership, the proverb reminds its wearer and viewers that a

³ Both Asante and Ewe societies have *kente* weaving traditions, but I will focus on Asante *kente* because it is the aesthetics of the Asante *kente* that have been appropriated in the United States.

⁴ Joseph K. Adjaye, "The Discourse of Kente Cloth: From Haute Couture to Mass Culture." In *Language, Rhythm, and Sound: Black Popular Culture in the 21st Century*, edited by Joseph A. Adjaye and Adrienne R. Andrews, 23.

⁵ James Anderson, "Crazy for Kente: The Tradition Behind the Trend," *Emerge* 2.1, 1990, 68.

⁶ Doran Ross, "Kente and Its Image Outside of Ghana," in *Wrapped in Pride*, ed. Doran H. Ross (1998), 100.

leader must exercise power judiciously if he expects to receive help and cooperation from the people he rules. Another pattern, “unity is strength,” underscores the importance of collaboration among leaders: (Figure 4).

Today the Asante people recognize as many as three hundred patterns of *kente*⁷ each with their own identifying names, and the repertoire continues to expand as kings, chiefs, and members of the aristocracy commission weavers to come up with new designs.⁸ An early factor contributing to the expansion of designs and related names was the introduction in the mid-nineteenth century of colorful imported factory-made threads brought by Europeans through the trans-Atlantic trade. Once strictly indigo blue and white (Figure 5), *kente* quickly became the colorful strip weave that we know today (Figure 6). By the mid-twentieth century *kente* has also become more popularized and nationalized in Ghana, and it was through that process of change that we come to understand how it made its way to the U.S.⁹

Kente Cloth in the U.S.

The story of *kente*'s presence in the U.S. begins with Ghana's independence. On the eve of that critical turning point in Ghana's history in 1957, Kwame Nkrumah, the country's first president¹⁰ wore *kente* as a visual symbol of Ghana's national pride, or as Anderson describes it, a “banner of empowerment” aimed at bringing his people

⁷ Joseph K. Adjaye, “The Discourse of Kente Cloth,” 24-28.

⁸ Adjaye, “The Discourse of Kente Cloth,” 27.

⁹ Susan Gott, “Ghanaian Kente and African-Print Commemorative Cloth,” in *African Interweave*, ed. Susan Cooksey. (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2011), 74.

¹⁰ Nkrumah was Ewe.

together as collective nation (Figure 7).¹¹ Seeing it as such, he often wore it when meeting with high-ranking political officials in the United States, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower (Figure 8), who readily showed his admiration for the Ghanaian wrapper. Over time, black Americans embraced the cloth as a way to honor their African heritage and Motherland roots, with Nkrumah the conduit for doing so.¹² In a photograph of Muhammad Ali, the great boxer, shaking hands with Nkrumah (Figure 9), he sports the traditional man's kente ensemble. Here, the alliance between the Ghanaian president, the face of African democracy, and a Black American hero is exemplified with an enthusiastic handshake and Ali's newly acquired Ghanaian garment. Images like this one, spurred Black Americans to partake in the *kente* tradition and bring the cloth into their own cultural celebrations and cries for independence.¹³ And so, by the 1960s—arguably some of the most significant years for African American freedom in the United States— African Americans were wearing *kente* as a symbol of African heritage and a united black American community.¹⁴

As it had been in Ghana, woven *kente* was susceptible to changes in the United States, with Ghanaian weavers adapting their production to accommodate. Noting its traditional association with Ghanaian royalty and leadership, African-Americans began to embrace it as a marker of achievement at commencement ceremonies. But instead of wearing a whole cloth of *kente*, they would only wear one strip of it as a stole to affirm their African heritage as apparent in this image, one of the first examples of *kente* in

¹¹ Susan Gott, "Ghanaian Kente and African-Print Commemorative Cloth," 74.

¹² Joseph K. Adjaye, "The Discourse of Kente Cloth: From Haute Couture to Mass Culture." Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 1997, 35.

¹³ Doran H. Ross, "Kente and Its Image Outside of Ghana," in *Wrapped in Pride*, ed. Doran H. Ross (1998), 173.

¹⁴ Ross, "Kente and Its Image Outside of Ghana," 175.

academia (Figure 10). The adoption of *kente* stoles into academic regalia also brought about new patterns and designs that would serve to mark one's membership in a society or organization and to highlight school-pride. Some of the first *kente* stoles resemble the customary *kente* of Akan societies; the complicated, spider-like pattern is much the same as the first examples of *kente* cloths. However, over the past few decades, *kente* has moved away from African patterns and color combinations and towards text to highlight the graduation year, a fraternity or sorority, or a Black Student Union (BSU) as exemplified in an image of a BSU stole (Figure 11).¹⁵ While *kente*'s adoption into the American academic system suggests the textile's growing importance, it also marks a movement away from the aesthetic qualities of *kente* made for Asante consumption.¹⁶

The change is evident in a comparison of the stole that W.E.B. Dubois' (1868-1963) wore at academic ceremonies in the 1950s and what American graduates wear as recently as 2013. The former *kente* stole resembles the, more traditionally, Asante *kente*.¹⁷ The patterns include complicated geometric designs and the oranges, yellows, and reds appear to overlap to create this intricately woven textile (Figure 12). More recently, *kente* stoles have simplified to only include a three or four colored striped pattern and lettering to signify the class year or private organization as with this example of a *kente* stole (Figure 13). *Kente* stoles continue to develop and these changes show how black Americans have ingested the textile tradition and have fully made it their own, as we will later in a discussion of Skidmore's *kente* tradition.

¹⁵ Doran H. Ross, "Kente and Its Image Outside of Ghana," 175.

¹⁶ This relates to the stoles that Skidmore makes for their students. Ghanaian weavers have begun weaving *kente* stoles in varying patterns to fulfill this need.

¹⁷ Dubois was one of the first African American academics to wear *kente* at commencement ceremonies. This will be discussed more in relation to *kente* in the academic sphere.

By the 1970s and 1980s, African American church officials were also wearing *kente* to assert their African roots.¹⁸ *Kente* appeared on ministers' robes, on the altar or pulpit, and on Bible covers, among other articles of clothing and décor (Figure 14).¹⁹ In this image, a clergy member models his *kente*-trimmed robes.

Several ministers have spoken about the use of *kente* in their congregations pointing to its symbolic value and importance in their role as church leaders. For Reverend Antonio Nelson of Trinity and St. Philip's Episcopal Cathedral of Newark, New Jersey, the experience of wearing *Kente* is intensely religious. He explains:

We put on a *kente* stole because it means we are carrying the burden of the congregation here; so this symbolizes the yoke of Christ. Back in Ghana, when I wear this *kente* stole, it talks about God, God, God, God, God... that before the White man brought us God we knew God already.²⁰

Other ministers have a more multi-ethnic, multi-denominational understanding of *kente*. For Reverend Tom Choi of the Ascension/English Ministry of the Los Angeles Korean United Methodist Church, the experience is rooted less in a relationship with a Christian God and more in the heterogeneity of the world community. He explained in an interview at a church service in 1998, "I wear a *kente* robe...as a means of solidarity and giving thanks for the diversity of people throughout the world."²¹ *Kente* united congregations with a larger, worldwide religious community and acts as a reminder of

¹⁸ African Americans also brought the textile into celebrations like Kwanzaa and Martin Luther King Day as a way to honor their heritage and homeland roots while claiming their place in American culture. For example, the customary Kwanzaa *mkeke*, or straw altar place, began to appear in *kente* adding a West African touch to the new tradition of Kwanzaa.

¹⁹ Quick, "Pride and Dignity: African American Perspective on Kente," 243.

²⁰ Betsy D. Quick, "Pride and Dignity: African American Perspectives on Kente," in *Wrapped in Pride*, ed. Doran H. Ross, (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 243.

²¹ Quick, "Pride and Dignity: African American Perspective on Kente," 219.

something greater than the singular self. The themes of unity, strength, and solidarity among the black American community as well as the growing belief that *kente* represents multiculturalism become evident in *kente's* role in the religious sphere.

Kente also found its place in academic communities as individuals sought ways to celebrate their faculty and students of color. Renowned black individuals such as W.E.B. Dubois, a Harvard graduate and one of the founders of the NAACP, and Maya Angelou (b. 1928), poet, author and activist, chose to wear *kente* as a way to honor their African heritage during the ceremonies at which they were given honorary degrees.²² Dubois chose to add a bright yellows and orange *kente* strip to his of otherwise Western attire of a cap and gown. Combining the Western academic attire with an African textile connected him to his African ancestry at the same time that is celebrated his lived experience as an African American academic (Returning to Figure 10).

By the late 1970s, graduates from predominantly black academic institutions in the Southern-most states of this country were also wearing *kente* at commencement with several intentions in mind, one, to celebrate their African heritage, two, add to the prestige of a college degree, and, three, highlight the ongoing battle for Civil Rights. As the tradition grew, many pan-Hellenic organizations distributed specific *kente* stoles to their graduating members. *Kente* became a way to not only celebrate African heritage but also a way to identify the wearer as a member of a private organization, like a

²² Quick, "Pride and Dignity: African American Perspectives on Kente," In *Wrapped in Pride*, ed. Doran H. Ross, (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 171-172 .

fraternity or sorority and even with clubs and organization with goals of political activism.²³

By the 1990s, predominately white colleges in the northeastern United States embraced the *kente* into their graduation ceremonies as a way to celebrate their growing diversity, racially, and ethnically, and more recently, geographically.²⁴ The textile now represents a myriad of identities including Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans who wear the textile as a representation of their unique backgrounds and underrepresentation at colleges and universities much like the African American students. Although these colleges often struggle to increase diversity, *kente* served as a way to highlight their students of color and celebrate the added challenges of being an under-represented racial or ethnic identity in a largely homogenous student body. Today, *kente* speaks not only about a particular African identity or homeland tradition, but also about the growing multiculturalism of these colleges.

Kente at Skidmore

Kente stoles first came to Skidmore through the leadership of Pat Trosclair, Dean of Student Affairs for Multicultural Students and Director of the Intercultural Center. Trosclair, an African American woman, introduced the stoles during her seven-year stint at Skidmore from 1995 to 2002. *Kente* stoles at Skidmore are now overseen by two separate and, in some ways, opposing departments: Student Academic Services and the Office of Student Diversity Programs (OSDP). Firstly, Mariel Martin heads the Office of

²³ Quick, 232-234.

²⁴ Ben Gose, "Kente at Commencement," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 43.37, 1995: A31.

Student Diversity Programs, the face of intercultural life on campus. She²⁵ began presenting students of color with *kente* stoles in 2006 to recognize the diversity of the senior class.²⁶ The other department that oversees the distribution of *kente* is the Student Academic Services, under the leadership of Darren Drabek. It concerns itself with international students and the various obstacles they confront including adjusting to life in the United States. Drabek began having international students wear stoles in 2008 as a way to celebrate the growing international student program.²⁷

For this project, I wanted to learn why these departments brought *kente* to Skidmore, which students they invite to wear the stoles at graduation, and how the Skidmore community feels about the tradition. In talking to the Skidmore community, I found both positive and negative reactions towards the tradition and I realized that Skidmore is responsible for several changes to *kente*'s aesthetic qualities and symbolic meaning. I will introduce the different types of Skidmore *kente* stoles, explain the intentions of the administrative staff that distribute the stoles to students, explore a few of the ironies and contentions of the tradition, and, finally, present several student voices as they express their views of *kente* at Skidmore.

The stoles that OSDP distributes are based on the *kente* stoles of other American institutions. The stoles are black, blue, purple, or red and the words, "Class of 2014" are woven into the textile (Figure 15). Here, two young women pose for a picture after

²⁵ Martin first learned about the *kente* tradition when she was at college in Pennsylvania. She remembers that the African American students really embraced the tradition and it became a large part of graduation. Martin wished to instill a similar excitement in students of color at Skidmore.

²⁶ "Office of Student Diversity Programs," Skidmore College, accessed March 20, 2014.

²⁷ "Student Academic Services: International Student Resources," Skidmore College, Accessed March 22, 2014.

commencement in their graduation robes and purple and black *kente* stoles. Students of color may decide what color stole to wear based on their own personal preferences or in an effort to match the stole to other cords and medals they may be wearing (Figure 16-19). The colors do not hold any greater symbolic meaning. The stoles also have various colors woven in a striped design in a corresponding color palette and each stole also has a golden Asante stool woven into the design, a symbol of royalty and prestige that connects the textile back to its Ghanaian roots.

The stoles that Student Academic Services distributes to the international students are very different from the OSDP stoles. Student Academic Services, under the leadership of Darren Drabek, concerns itself with international students and the various obstacles they confront including adjusting to life in the United States. Drabek began having international students wear stoles as a way to celebrate the growing international student program.²⁸ This year, Drabek has ordered stoles with a black background with Skidmore's colors in a striped pattern and he will then sew each international student's respective national flag onto the stole. On the left is an international student stole from 2011. Up until 2013, the international student stoles were all black with the colors of each respective student's flag woven into the strip. But the color alone did not adequately identify the nationality of the wearer. For example, the black, green, and red on this young woman's stole could represent any number of nations with these national colors (Figure 20). Kenya, Sudan, Libya, Afghanistan, Palestine, Somaliland, Kuwait, and Iraq all have black, green, and red on their flags. It becomes obvious why Drabek decided to change his design.

²⁸ "Student Academic Services: International Student Resources," Skidmore College, Accessed March 22, 2014.

Skidmore's aesthetic changes to the stole play into the growing *kente* industry in America. Ghanaian weavers, many of whom now live in the United States, have met the needs of American academic institutions, like Skidmore, by starting companies that provide *kente* stoles specifically for graduation ceremonies.²⁹ Skidmore supports two such companies. Firstly, House of Stole, based out of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, sells custom-made stoles that are woven in Ghana and is headed by Peter Opoku from Ghana his younger brother, Isaac, their mother, and their friend, Duke Yeboah, all of Ghanaian origin. The company provides authentic, responsibly produced stoles to American colleges and universities, but also aims to support Ghanaian schools by donating a portion of their proceeds back to their product's country of origin.³⁰ Another company is Asanteman *Kente Works*, a website run by James Ntim, a Ghanaian weaver who lives in Columbus, Ohio. Ntim, who does all the company's weaving himself, moved to the United States from Ghana in 2000 and started his company to create a commercial outlet for his weaving. Skidmore's *kente* tradition supports these entrepreneurs each year as they place an order of almost one hundred stoles.

The stoles have also changed and adapted new symbolic meaning at Skidmore. Martin and Drabek see *kente* celebrating accomplishments, solidarity, and shared history of those who wear the stoles, yet the two types of *kente* target two very different groups of students to wear the stoles. Martin sees OSDP stoles as a way to unite all

²⁹ Recently, these companies have even begun allowing schools and individuals to design their own *kente* stoles. The companies give up their entire ownership over the textile in order to fulfill the demands of their American consumers.

³⁰ Carol Brévert-Demm, "The Stoles that Stole the Show," *Swarthmore College Bulletin*, 2013.

students who identify with the various types of “otherness” under a diversity umbrella.³¹ Martin explains, “For those who decide to wear OSDP *kente*, it’s really a point of pride...a way to represent connection to your identity and what this identity has added to your education.”³² Seniors who decide to wear *kente* thusly represent many different races and ethnicities, including Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans, but the tradition seeks to unite these identities under the overarching group of students of color. The tradition also recognizes many students’ commitment to organizing and running clubs and organizations under the “diversity” umbrella. Martin wants to honor students’ involvement as ambassador for diversity and change at Skidmore along with their personal racial and ethnic identities.³³

Inspired by OSDP’s use of *kente* to unite students of color, Drabek sees the international student stoles highlighting the growing number of international students at Skidmore. Skidmore adds more international students to each first-year class: the Class of 2014 has just thirty international students, while the 2017 Class boasts a record number seventy-four international students, marking the international student body as the fastest growing identity on campus. The students come from immensely different backgrounds and hail from six out of the seven continents. They represent a myriad of religions, races, ethnicities, and a wide variety of socio-economic classes. Drabek wishes to represent the international student body as a homogenous group, but varying flags that add a sense of individuality to the stoles’ meaning. In a snapshot from an end-of-

³¹ Martin explained that some African American students individually decided to wear *kente* at commencement before her involvement in the program, but she was the one who officially introduced the tradition to OSDP in 2006.

³² Interview with Mariel Martin, Conducted at Skidmore College, March 26, 2014.

³³ Interview with Martin, March 26, 2014.

the-year celebration honoring the graduating international students, the seniors show-off their international student stoles (Figure 21).

The first major issue arises in the way OSDP distributes and targets certain students to partake in the tradition. Mariel and her office promote the *kente* tradition as an open and inclusive one; yet, she only contacts students of color to wear *kente* stoles.³⁴ If a student who is not a student of color wishes to wear a stole s/he may contact Mariel and order a stole; but by formerly inviting only students of color to participate in the tradition, OSDP is giving the stoles an exclusive quality. It might be a more comprehensive representation of the student body if the OSDP offered the stoles to all graduating seniors. This would include those students who may not have formally identified themselves as students of color. Contacting the entire senior class would also give greater importance to the stoles because more students would understand the importance of *kente* and its role in the Skidmore community.

The aesthetic changes that Skidmore has made to *kente* in order to create an international student stole also suggest the difficulties and controversies of the tradition. These stoles stretch the symbolic meaning of *kente* in an entirely different direction and the cloth has never before been used to celebrate multiculturalism in this way. Even when other identities like Hispanic or Asian minorities use the textile in graduation stoles, the textile represents a marginalized group; however, this may not be the case with all international students. Some international students hail from nations with histories of colonization including Great Britain, Holland, and France. To this point, there is something ironic about sewing a Union Jack—the flag of Ghana’s

³⁴ Sometime during the admissions or registration process, all students must identify their racial and national identity.

colonizer— on a *kente* stole.³⁵ Although it is exciting to see Skidmore bending the textile's meaning and embracing it whole-heartedly, this may not be the most positive way to appropriate the textile into the Skidmore community.

Moreover, the aesthetic changes made to the textile were not created due to student interest. Instead, Skidmore administration manipulated the structure of the stole, adding Skidmore's colors and sewing on flags, with very little understanding of *kente* as a textile tradition. It might be a positive appropriation of the textile if the international students, as a united group, decided to use the textile at commencement, but, after speaking with Drabek, this was clearly not the case. These *kente* stoles seem to be a forced representation of the international student body, not a naturally occurring tradition created by the international students.

Through my interviews with students, faculty, staff, and administration, it became clear that the Skidmore community does not universally accept the tradition. Generally speaking, most positive reactions to the textile tradition came from African American students while international students and students of Asian heritage were more skeptical of the tradition.³⁶ By hearing from a cross-section of Skidmore students, *kente* appears to be contentious and the intentions of the tradition may need to be revisited.

Many students of color embrace these two *kente* traditions as a means of celebrating their cultural heritage and their role in creating a diverse student body.³⁷

³⁵ Interview with Darren Drabek.

³⁶ These statements are, of course, generalization; however, I wish to express these overarching themes that appeared, but do not want to make a claim that certain identities on campus have a uniform opinion of *kente*.

³⁷ See Addendum I.

Some of them feel that *kente* specifically honors their families and ancestry while others feel that it highlights how students of color have infiltrated a traditionally white academic institution. Still others see *kente* as a celebration of multiculturalism, an important part of life at Skidmore. When asked, “Why do you think students wear *kente*?” in an anonymous survey, one individual explained:

...It reinforces and supports cultural heritages and identities, placing wearers in a position of solidarity with one another within a shared vision of multiculturalism. [It] allows students to express traditional heritages, regardless of whether or not they are Ghanaian or consider themselves to be of ‘African descent.’³⁸

One Skidmore student of color, certainly agrees with the positive nature of the *kente* tradition. He explained in an interview, “I feel that I am bringing those who did not make it this far across the stage with me. A lot went into me being able to come this far and graduate from this institution. My stole will represent those people who struggled and fought to make this happen.” Mentioning the recently released film, *Twelve Years a Slave*, and its eye-opening narrative, the student made it clear that for him, his *kente* stole will represent all those who lived and died so that he—a young African American male from Cleveland—can graduate from a progressive and competitive institution of higher learning.³⁹

For another student of color graduating this spring, the choice is obvious, “There’s no doubt I’ll be wearing *kente*. I haven’t even had time to order it yet, but I said, ‘Yes, get my the blackest one.’ ” This student has fought for equality at Skidmore and in the world at-large and because of this work she feels that her racial identity has

³⁸ Kente at Skidmore Survey, Conducted at Skidmore College, March 24-March 30, 2014. Individual answered survey 3/25/14 at 9:22AM

³⁹ Interview with anonymous student, Skidmore College, Conducted on November 14, 2013.

blossomed throughout her college career. She also believes that Skidmore is not alone in its struggles with diversity and for her, *kente* represents how African Americans have made a mark on American academia, “*Kente* is a way for us Black people to insert a little piece of our culture onto the academic gowns designed by white people. Academic institutions were built to exclude us and *kente* is a little way to show how far we have come.”⁴⁰ In this young woman’s case, *kente* represents many different parts of her identity at Skidmore and the world at-large.

President Glotzbach and his wife, Marie, also endorse the tradition. The president suggested that Skidmore’s commencement ceremony holds a certain amount of tradition and solemnity while also celebrating the individuality of the graduates. He notes, “There are many different ways to wear a stole. Some students seem to specifically wear a particular stole with an overwhelming sense of pride and, for other students, the stole blends in with honors cords, Phi Beta Kappa keys, and other academic regalia.” This marks another dynamic quality of *kente* in that its importance and symbolic value can bend with its wearer’s intention. Similarly, Marie Glotzbach added that, each year, she notices how bright and colorful the graduates dress. She explained, “Skidmore requires a black cap and gown, but this is really a platform for many different decorations. I really notice all the colors on graduation day. The *kente* stoles are just one way in which students add to the colorful celebration.”⁴¹ Overall, the Glotzbachs feel that stoles, cords, and other regalia are welcome at graduation because the ceremony honors how each graduate has changed and grown both inside and

⁴⁰ Interview with anonymous student, Skidmore College, Conducted April 3, 2014.

⁴¹ Interview with Phillip and Marie Glotzbach, Skidmore College, Conducted April 9, 2014.

outside the classroom. The Glotzbachs see no harm in bringing racial, ethnic, and national diversity to the forefront at commencement. In fact, they welcome it.

However, some Skidmore community members, including many international students, feel that markers of racial and ethnic diversity seem out of place at an academic ceremony and suggest that the tradition should be revised. Similarly, a tradition that highlights specific identities may also sidelines those who struggle to categorize themselves into a specific identity a challenge for every student at Skidmore. These negative characteristics of the tradition round out the discussion of *kente* at Skidmore and point to where the tradition falls short.

Several students expressed their desire to be acknowledged for their academic excellence alone, with no added recognition for a particular racial or ethnic identity. When one student who wished to remain anonymous was asked: “What are your thoughts about students wearing *kente*?” he stated, “I don't see the point because we strive for unity then point out differences. Accomplishing a degree is not made more impressive because of racial differences. I do not think students should wear *kente*.” While students wish to acknowledge diversity on campus and support Skidmore’s goal of creating an inclusive setting for students from diverse backgrounds, the tradition may be out of place at commencement, which is first and foremost a celebration of academic achievement.

One international student from Zimbabwe expressed similar skepticism of the Skidmore tradition. He explained:

It’s a nice thought, but at the same time, it’s singling students out because of how they look. From the minute we get to campus as freshmen, there is a paradox between the administration telling us we are all equal, but then things come up

like how they lower admissions standards because you might come from a background that Skidmore needs to increase their diversity statistics.⁴²

Emphasizing difference over equality by singling out students from diverse backgrounds and having them wear *kente*, even if it is a choice, makes him question the tradition. For this student, the *kente* stoles mark individuals who were at some sort of disadvantage during their college career. He suggests that whether a student faces the added challenge of socio-economic strife, representing a racial or ethnic minority, or travelling from abroad to attend Skidmore, these students do inarguably face challenges during their four years in Saratoga. However, he does not want to play up race or privilege and suggests that all Skidmore students face a myriad of challenges during college. Thus, the institution should not highlight certain students during an academic ceremony due to their personal identities. He frankly stated, “I don’t play the race thing. It’s 2014. Let’s move on.”⁴³ He feels that students should only wear regalia pertaining to their academic achievements at commencement, not their individual identities. Students attend the college to earn a Bachelors of Arts or Bachelors of Science and commencement should singly acknowledge this scholastic accomplishment. *Kente* stoles, a tradition rooted in cultural heritage, not academia, may distract from the other regalia.

The visual comparison of *kente* stoles in relation to honor cords at Skidmore commencement suggest that *kente* may distract from other honors (Returning to Figure 15).⁴⁴ Of course, the central figures automatically draw more attention due to their

⁴² Interview with anonymous student, Skidmore College, Conducted on February 14, 2014.

⁴³ Interview with anonymous student.

⁴⁴ Figure 1 appears on the Skidmore Website: Commencement 2013 in this cropped form; however, Figure 5, in an un-cropped version, appears in an online photo-album on the Skidmore Website.

position in the image but it must be acknowledged that the other graduates to the right and back in the image hardly draw the eye at all. Several of the background figures wear red or dark purple cords as they walk, adding to their dark dress code; however, the bright *kente* colors overpower the academic cords. While an argument against the stoles seems to go against celebrating diversity and the achievements of deserving individuals, a visual comparison of the size and color palette of the *kente* stoles versus honor cords do suggest that the stoles may draw attention away from the honors cords. Although this is not a reason to suspend the *kente* tradition, it is important to draw attention to the difference in size and color palette between the *kente* and honor cords and how *kente* may draw more attention to its wearer than a smaller honors cord.

Several students also took issue with the fact that *kente* stoles only recognize students of a specific racial identity. Many students feel excluded from the ethnic and racial clubs and groups on campus. In one sense, clubs have the right to remain true to themselves and cater to the specific racial identity that the club focuses on and all diversity clubs claim to be all-inclusive. Yet, students may not feel like they fit into the club or social group of their identity. One young woman anonymously admitted, “I tried to be friends with all the Hispanic students, but I’m not Latina enough for them because my mom isn’t Latina.”⁴⁵ Another young woman added, “One girl came up to me at a party last night and asked: ‘If you look so black, why do you sound so white.’” These students bring up the complexity of racial and ethnic identities on campus.

Kente also encourages the Skidmore community to discuss themes that might not otherwise come up in conversation not all of which were positive. One student explained

⁴⁵ Interview with anonymous student, Skidmore College, Interview April 14, 2014.

that African American culture should not be appropriated by other cultures. She explained, “I hate it when you see white girls wearing black hair styles or Miley Cyrus using black dance moves. So, *kente* is something that they’re not going to take from us.” She suggested that anyone who is not African American must have a good excuse to wear *kente* at commencement this spring. Yet, when I explained that Hispanic Americans and other students of color would be wearing the textile at Skidmore commencement, she added, “You know, I guess that’s fine. They’ve overcome a lot too and it was not their choice to come to this country just like us [African Americans] and I guess the textile did come from Africa so we are borrowing that in a way, too.” When I added that some white students will be wearing *kente* at commencement because of the international students stoles, she did not know how to respond and expressed that she was unsure how far these developments could go while maintaining *kente*’s meaning for her people. *Kente* certainly did not provide any answers to these controversies, but it did make this young woman contemplate how *kente* represents the complicated nature diversity and how she fit into this trajectory.

Another pivotal point in my interviews occurred during an interview with Mariel Martin. She explained how she wanted to include the Pride, Skidmore’s LGBTQ club in the *kente* tradition; however, she received little to no interest from the members of this club. This pointed out how Martin’s office and her staff tried to include all difference under the same category of “otherness.” Perhaps, the LGBTQ students feared the rainbow stoles that might ensue or maybe there was a consensus that gender and sexuality were best left out of commencement. None-the-less, it is interesting to understand that Skidmore seeks to place all difference in one “diversity” category and,

once again, the students did not ask to celebrate their identity at commencement, this recognition comes from the administration in the hopes that they will highlight the diversity of our campus for all to see at commencement.

Several students with Asian and Asian-American backgrounds questioned the significance of an African textile as a representation of their identity. One student explained:

I like the idea [of wearing *kente*], but I'm a bit skeptical about wearing it because it represents African descent. As a student of color who identifies as Asian, I really would like it if there were more of an inclusive representation of ethnic descent. Granted, there is none that I can think of off the top of my head, but I think it would be nice to have some more inclusive marker of ethnic identity.⁴⁶

These concerns suggest that the *kente* tradition as a way to represent students of color at Skidmore has room for improvement and many students of color who are not African American struggle to connect with *kente* due to its Ghanaian origins. This student response suggests that *kente* may not be as flexible in symbolic meaning as the college and many other American college and universities wish it to be. Students seek to keep racial identities separate and unique, instead of grouping all “different” identities together.

Overall, *kente* means many different things for Skidmore students. On one hand, the stoles embody the connection with African American heritage. As one student explained, the stoles deeply embody his African American roots. Another student expressed similar feelings towards the textile; yet, she also highlights her advocacy for racial equality at Skidmore and in the world at-large. On the other hand, the LGBTQ community and some students of Asian heritage question the role of *kente* at Skidmore

⁴⁶ Anonymous Interview, Skidmore College, March 18th, 2014.

and struggle to understand the significance of a West African textile with a recent history in the black American community. Moreover, Skidmore's *kente* tradition falls short because the stoles do not derive from a celebration of cultural unity on campus; instead, the administration uses the tradition as a way to highlight diversity of the graduating class. Perhaps, if the administration had more faith in the student body to appropriately embrace its differences, the *kente* tradition would appear to be much more organic than it does today. Skidmore students are interdisciplinary scholars, musicians, athletes, artists, and political and social activists, among so many other identities. What students decide to wear to signify their racial and ethnic diversity would mean so much more than a school-sponsored campaign advertising diversity on commencement day.

Throughout my research, I found that diversity on campus is "hot topic" issue and it must be addressed in order for Skidmore to be an open and welcoming environment. I received heated reactions from several administration personnel, students, and faculty when I brought up questions concerning how Skidmore deals with diversity. During the past academic year, individuals have questioned how diversity relates to an art historical discourse. Other have questioned how an individual, like myself, who does not identify as a student of color or an international student could understand the intricacies of diversity on campus. I hope this project could spur a campus-wide discussion of diversity. Perhaps by focusing on an art object, like *kente*, this would root the discussion in history, culture, and the trajectory of a West African textile, taking some of the pressure off the participants in a dialogue, but eventually encouraging the community to tackle difficult subjects.

Despite these discrepancies and frustrations with the tradition, the most fascinating part of *kente*'s role at Skidmore is just that: that it has become an important part of Skidmore's community. In his book, "The Social Life of Things...", Appadurai's suggests that the value and meaning of an object derives from the movement, the transactions, and the sharing of these objects.⁴⁷ An object's importance grows as individuals pass it on to different cultural and social settings. This is the story of *kente*. The textile's importance has been added to, revised, and passed along over the past four centuries and Skidmore's use of the textile acts as just one instance, one pause on this cycle of development and change. Skidmore's additions to the textile and the difficulties with diversity that the textile has come to denote simply add to the textile meaning as it moves along in time and space.

⁴⁷ Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value, In *The Social Life of Thing: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press: 1986), 3-50.

Addendum I:

Collected Anonymous Survey Responses

What does it mean to wear *kente* at graduation?
Do you mind the tradition of wearing *kente*?

“I think it's great. Going to a liberal arts school is all about asserting our individuality and creativity. Why would we want to stifle that?”

“To me, it marks them as a strong individual, proud of their heritage and connecting themselves to a larger community, not necessarily their class. Perhaps they never felt incorporated into the student body during their undergrad years, and this just materializes that.”

“[*Kente* represents] Celebration; honor; recognition of successful completion of a degree and honoring their international heritage.”

“It's beautiful material so can't complain too much about it being used!”

“Expresses their individuality, celebrates our school's diversity and acceptance.”

“It means nothing different than the meaning behind people receiving a sash or other article to signify honors, achievements, titles, etc (which may be considered differentiating people from the rest of the student body). The article of clothing is intended to signify an intangible achievement, commitment, or affiliation.”

“I don't mind the wearing of kente. It is no different from the ropes that are worn, as a symbol of membership or achievement. I don't think that there should be a debate over the wearing of kente cloth. In a way there is a unity between students who are wearing the kente on their graduation who have had a very distinct and unique experience towards attaining a degree.”

“It is just a piece of material some individuals can identify with. Everyone can't identify with it because they do not understand the history behind it. So what if students are different. Let people have their kente's and don't try to make it a thing for everyone. It allows us to make a cultural statement fashionably. We wear Kente cloths as a sign of pride and solidarity.”

“It's a great symbol of strength! After all, the imperial and colonial history of our country and our world still has profound effects on students today. Taking pride in where students come from, even if it differentiates them from the rest of the student body, serves to remind us all that the world is a beautifully diverse place.”

“I want to study abroad in Ghana so I think it's cool! I don't think it's a bad thing to wear clothes that stand out, as long as it's not for an offensive reason.”

“I don't see the point because we strive for unity then point out differences. Accomplishing a degree is not made more impressive because of racial differences. I do not think students should wear Kente.”

“I think its a positive embracement and representation of pride and diversity.”

“If a student feels that wearing kente connects them to their culture and background, I see no reason why they shouldn't take part in wearing it.”

“I wish I knew more about it! I understand it as a symbol of multicultural expression, especially within a microcosmic setting such as Skidmore that is relatively homogenous. But I would love to know more about why.”

“I think differentiating oneself from the remaining student body is great and shows one is unique.”

“It is like decorating your cap, or wearing a cord for a society/group you are in- it is a way of paying homage to something important to you.”

“I think it's great that student of color wear the cloth to differentiate themselves from the remaining student body. Throughout the countries history students of color have had to face different struggles than their white peers. However, I think having students of color wear this cloth on graduation, in some way eroticizes the culture that it comes

from. Blacks in this country have a different culture an Africans so I think it's important to take note of that. There is so much that can be picked from Black American culture which can be applied to graduation gowns.”

“If is a cultural thing they should be able to represent their heritage and recognize their accomplishment of graduating from an American college. But I think it should not take away from the uniformity of the senior class as a whole. So maybe have a piece of kente under their graduation robe or as a tassel that goes around their neck similar to the ones I wore at high school graduation for an honor society.”

“I think it's pretty silly. We're supposed to be a community and all part of one graduating class. Separating some with kente does not really make sense to me.”



Figure 1: *Two Skidmore students wear kente during their African Art class, strip woven rayon cloth, Ghana, Lisa Aronson's personal collection.*



Figure 2: Cole, Herbert, *Asante Chief in Regalia, with Kente Cloth*, c. 1970, photograph, West Africa, Asante.



Figure 3: *Kente Cloth: Man's Wrapper: "He who climbs a good tree, gets a good push,"* Mid-20th Century, rayon, Asante (Ghana), Lisa Aronson's Private Collection.

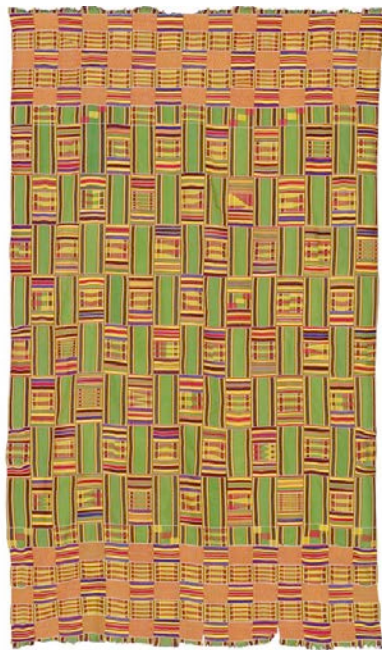


Figure 4: *Kente Cloth: Mmaaban, "Unity is Strenght,"* Strip weave cloth, 194cm x 116.2cm, Seattle Art Museum.

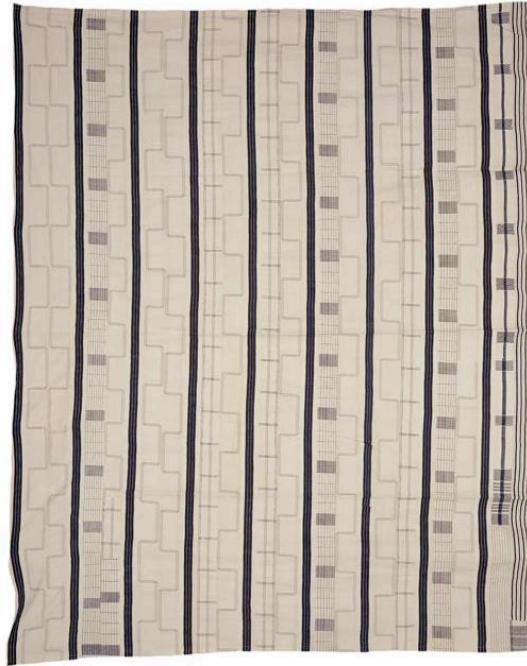


Figure 5: *Kente Cloth: Nkontompo Ntama*, strip weave cotton cloth, 99 11/16th x 124 13/16th, Seattle Art Museum.

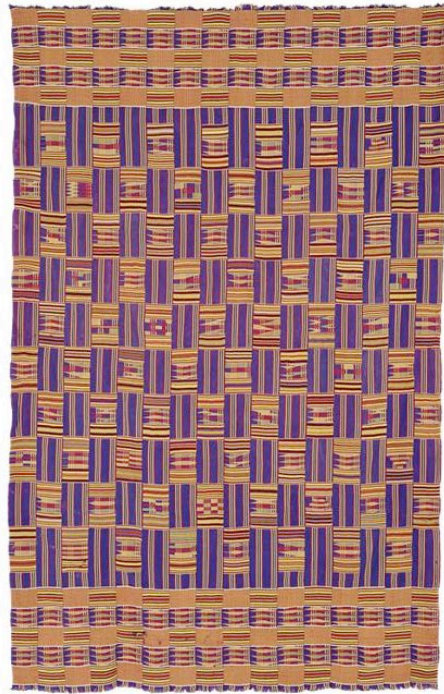


Figure 6: *Kente Cloth: Mmeeda*, "Something that has not happened before," Strip woven cloth, 59 1/16th in. x 92 1/2 in., Seattle Art Museum.



Figure 7: *Kwame Nkrumah Wearing Kente Cloth, 1957*, photograph. Guinea Coast, West Africa.



Figure 8: *President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana during Nkrumah's U.S. Visit, 1958*, photograph, Saratoga Springs: Skidmore College Visual Resources Collection.



Figure 9: *President of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah meets the boxer, Muhammad Ali, 1964, photograph, Les Voix du Monde- Archives d'Afrique.*



Figure 10: *W.E.B. Dubois' Academic Regalia, 2004, photography, W.E.B. Dubois Memorial Centre for Pan-African Culture.*



Figure 11: *Kente Stole: "Black Student Union,"* 2014, synthetic fibers, Asanteman Kente Works.



Figure 12: W.E.B. Dubois's *Kente Regalia*, 2003, Accra: W.E.B. Dubois Memorial Centre for Pan-African Culture.



Figure 13: Black *Kente Stole*, 2014, synthetic fibers, Asanteman Kente Works.

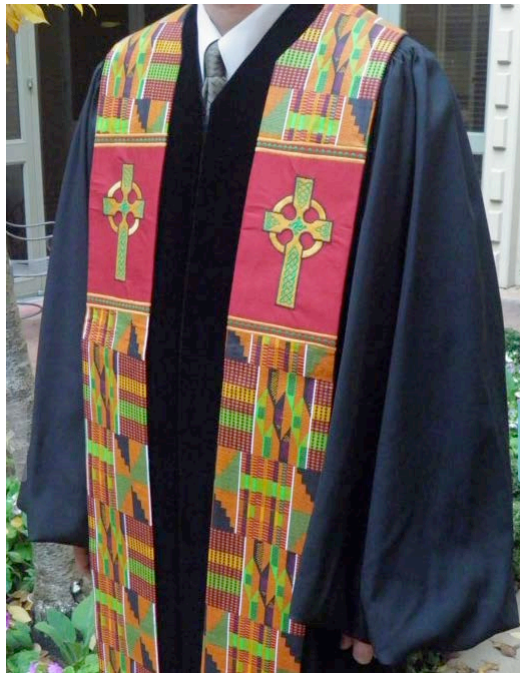


Figure 14: *Kente Cloth Clergy Stole*, 2013, Available on Etsy.com. Oakland, California.



Figure 15: *Two Skidmore graduates pose after graduation wearing Kente stoles, 2013, photograph, Skidmore College 2013 Commencement Photo Archive.*



Figure 16: Blue *Kente Stole*, 2014, synthetic fibers, Asanteman Kente Works.



Figure 17: Purple *Kente Stole*, 2014, synthetic fibers, Asanteman Kente Works.



Figure 18: Red *Kente Stole*, 2014, synthetic fibers, Asanteman Kente Works.

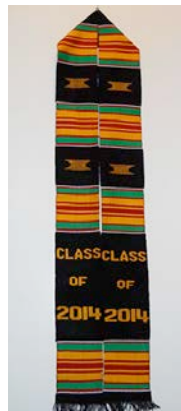


Figure 19: Black *Kente Stole*, 2014, synthetic fibers, Asanteman Kente Works.



Figure 18: *International Student at Skidmore with International Stole, 2011, Skidmore College 2011 Commencement Photo Archive.*



Figure 21: *Skidmore International Students, Class of 2012, Kente Ceremony, 2012, fuSkidmore College Student Academic Services Photo Archive.*

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