

## A brief history of kete weaving in Agbozume

*Excerpt from book: Philip Atsu Afeadie and John Mark Kwame Worclachie, Foundations of Agbozume: The Keta-Sómeawo, A.D. 1000 – 1930 (forthcoming).*

Many handicrafts are produced in Sóme Traditional Area of Ghana, headquartered at Agbozume. But *kete* weaving is particularly famous. As with other Ewe people of southeastern Ghana, kete weaving is an occupation which the people brought with them from *Hogbe*, the centres of emigration including Ketu in Yorubaland and Dotsie in modern Togo. Accordingly, kete weaving was well known among the Sómeawo at Keta by the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> In April 1718, for instance, Philip Eytzen, an official of the Dutch West Indies Company observed:

I found here at Quitta [Keta] a large number of children and men constantly busy spinning cotton on little sticks of about a foot length... Cotton can be found everywhere and a large quantity could be had if the Negroes did not use it themselves for weaving of cloths of various quantities.<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, the enterprise continued among the Keta-Sómeawo in their new domain of Agbozume which was established in 1793. Evidently, it has been noted of Salu I who founded Anlo-Afiadenyigba in the early 1800s that he had earlier travelled to “Agbozume where he settled temporarily as Kente weaver, farmer and hunter.”<sup>3</sup> By 1850 kete weaving had been well established in Sóme and, presumably, neighbouring Klikor and Wheta; and surely at Aflao.<sup>4</sup> As Peter Adler and Nicholas Barnard point out, “European missionaries of the mid-nineteenth century tell of many weavers being active in the Ewe lands; the air was disturbed by the noise of their looms, and the state of activity was compared with that of a Victorian workshop or mill.”<sup>5</sup> Notably, neighbouring Anexɔ too had developed as a centre of kete weaving; “in written records it [*kete*] dates back to at least 1847 when a man’s cloth of twenty-seven strips...was accessioned into a Danish collection as a “cotton blanket (kintee) from Popo”, an Ewe town in present-day Togo,” noted Doran Ross.<sup>6</sup>

In Sóme, kete weaving was done on narrow handloom traditional to West Africa, yielding cloth strips of between three and five inches (7.5 and 11.5 cm) wide, which were sewn together into a man’s and woman’s clothes and other garments. Cotton was the spun fibre for kete weaving;

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<sup>1</sup>Kate Peck Kent, *Introducing West African Cloth* (Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History, 1971), 35.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Albert van Dantzig, *The Dutch and the Guinea Coast, 1647-1742: A Collection of Documents from the General State Archive at The Hague* (Accra: GAAS, 1978), 206.

<sup>3</sup>B.C. Yaw Azumah, “A History of Anlo-Afiadenyigba since its Foundation”, Long Essay (Department of History, University of Ghana, 1980): 2.

<sup>4</sup>Report of the Assistant Colonial Surveyor, W.T.G. Lawson, on the countries between Lagos and Quittah, Lagos, 22 August 1879, no.26 Enclosures to Despatches from Governor to Secretary of State, January – August 1879, ADM 1/2/361 p.23: “Cloths of coarse native yarn are manufactured here.”

<sup>5</sup>Peter Adler and Nicholas Barnard, *African Majesty: The Textile Art of the Ashanti and Ewe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 10.

<sup>6</sup>Doran H. Ross, “Introduction: Fine Weaves and Tangled Webs,” in *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*, ed. Ross (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 23.

cotton grew in the wild, but it was also cultivated in Sόμε and neighbouring areas.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, cotton was purchased at Keta.<sup>8</sup>

Three major types of kete were produced in Sόμε. One type involved the product of simple weave; the general cotton cloth which was initially woven plain, and then developed in which cotton was dyed with indigo and other vegetable substances including the roots of plants such as *enyimɔ* and *dɔdɛmakpɔwɛ*.<sup>9</sup> In preparing indigo, Philip Eytzen noted the tradition adopted by Keta weavers in 1718, where they would “first soak the leaves and then make balls of them about the size of a fist, which they then put away. In this way, they seem to keep them in a good condition for more than a month.”<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, Paul Isert observed the tradition among weavers of Anexɔ in 1788; “above all they know how to dye fast, beautiful blue which, if it does not, actually surpass our indigo, is at least equal to it. They make it from a leaf of a kind of tree, and the root of another plant, over which they pour ash water made from palm nuts, thus causing it to ferment, although it is cold.”<sup>11</sup>

In Sόμε as well as Anexɔ, the weavers obtained red dye from hibiscus flower, but they hardly found it adequate, and therefore had resort to the technique prevalent in Asante, involving unraveling of European cloth for red yarn.<sup>12</sup> And Keta was a ready source of supply for Sόμε weavers, as “Keta since the seventeenth century had had a flourishing weaving industry reinforced by early silk cloth and commercial silk and cotton thread brought to the Dutch fort.”<sup>13</sup> Anyhow, the use of blue and red yarn enabled the Sόμε weaver to produce a variant of simple weave kete, plain with blue or red stripes or both.<sup>14</sup> This would develop into stripes and blocks of other colours, generally known as *klogo*, an example of which obtained, originally, in a man’s cloth known as *takpekpe le Anloga*, literally meaning convention in Anloga.

The second major type of kete produced in Sόμε was a specialized cloth of simple-weave, done either with high-grade cotton, or silk and rayon. And additional sets of weft and warp yarn were deployed in the weaving process. An example of such kete woven with additional set of weft yarn, *togodo* displayed pictorial representation of birds, animals, humans, and inanimate objects such as guns, stools and knives, enclosed in polygons.<sup>15</sup> *Togodo* would also be characterized as *novi vɔ, novi* (small heddle) warp which refers to the use of one drag stone for the warp and two pairs of heddles for weaving; the back pair of heddles was mainly used for making designs and

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<sup>7</sup>See DC. Arthur Covey, Poglu, and Agbosome, 7 and 16 October 1902, Public Records and Archives Administration Department [PRAAD], Accra, ADM 41/5/1 Miscellaneous Papers.

<sup>8</sup>Philip Atsu Afeadie, *History of Avenor A.D.1000-1930* (Cape Coast: Marcel Hughes, 2019), 113.

<sup>9</sup>Afeadie, *History of Avenor*, 113.

<sup>10</sup>Dantzig, *The Dutch and the Guinea Coast*, 206.

<sup>11</sup>Agbenyega Adedze, “Cloth in Eweland: Historical Perspectives,” in *Wrapped in Pride*, in *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*, ed. Ross (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1998), 134. “The bark of trees such as *Parkia* (locust bean) and *Acacia* would yield other colours for the weavers.” See Christopher D. Roy, 1982. “Mossi Weaving,” *African Arts*, vol. XV, no. 3 (1982): 50; see also John Picton and John Mach, *African Textiles* (Bath, England: Pasold Research Fund, 1979), 42.

<sup>12</sup>Dale Idiens, “An Introduction to Traditional African Weaving and Textiles,” in *Textiles of Africa*, eds. D. Idiens and K.G. Ponting (Bath, England: Pasold Research Fund, 1980), 13; Hans W. Debrunner, *A Church Between Colonial Powers: A Study of the Church in Togo* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965), 31.

<sup>13</sup>Kent, *Introducing West African Cloth*, 35.

<sup>14</sup>Philip Atsu Afeadie, “Beginnings of Ewe and Asante Weaving,” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, new series, no.15 (2013): 35.

<sup>15</sup>Adler and Barnard, *African Majesty*, 108-109.

patterns. *Noga* (bigger heddle) warp has a similar arrangement as *novi*, but the design produced is taller in height than that created with *novi*.

The third major group of kete produced in Sόμε involved cloths of compound-weave. When more than one set of warp yarn were used in weaving, a compound-weave kete was produced, generally known as *kpe-veve vɔ*, the term derived from the two dragstones to which the sets of warp yarn were tied to maintain tension. Compound-weave kete produced in Sόμε was characterized by thicker and more refined texture. Notably, compound-weave kete was also produced in Dɔtsie of modern Togo, and among Fon weavers of Dahomey in modern Republic of Bénin.<sup>16</sup>

In Sόμε, a specialized compound-weave kete known as *songé* involved silk warp and weft design of little crosses or squares floating on a cotton fabric.<sup>17</sup> *Songé* literally mean the ensign of *so* (*zakadza*) or *yeve*, the popular deity of traditional African religion, headquartered at Nogokpo in Sόμε; accordingly, *yeve* festivals, for instance, provided opportunities for devotees of the cult to be adorned in *songé*. It has been noted of the pictorial float patterns of Sόμε weavers, for instance, that they tended to “reflect not only an impressive artistic ability but also a considerable mastery of weaving techniques.”<sup>18</sup>

What factors induced the high craftsmanship among the Sόμε weavers of Agbozume and neighbouring areas? The stimulus varied in kind. There was the stimulus of foreign influence, embodied in the availability of European cloth which could be unravelled for red yarn and other colours, enabling the articulation of elaborate cloth patterns. Another stimulus involved local demand for kete and the price incentive. *Togodo*, for instance, was woven to order, and it represented an important item of wealth, and was therefore worn by the elite on special occasions. The local demand for other cloth patterns was encouraging. *Takpekpe le Anloga*, for example, is noted as being popular with the Ewe people in southern Volta Region of Ghana, and was often worn by weavers themselves.<sup>19</sup> There were cloth patterns which produced a “tweed” effect (*kadada vɔ*), and were much appreciated by women. Similarly, women, in particular, valued *songé* category, known to be common among Ewe weaving groups in the southern Volta Region of Ghana,<sup>20</sup> whose major outlet for kete had been Keta market and later Agbozume marketplace.<sup>21</sup>

Freedom of initiative largely stimulated the development of kete weaving in Sόμε. Although Sόμε weavers lacked the motivating influence of a royal court as obtained with Asante weavers in Bonwire, for instance, Sόμε weavers were governed by their skill and taste in devising elaborate cloth patterns. The choice of symbols and their patterning were left to the individual

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<sup>16</sup>Merrick Posnansky, “Traditional Cloth from the Ewe Heartland,” in *History, Design, and Craft in West African Strip-Woven Cloth* (Washington: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 122; Kate Kent, “West African Decorative Weaving,” *African Arts*, vol. 6, no.1 (Autumn 1972): 26-27.

<sup>17</sup>Venice Lamb, *West African Weaving* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 172; Kent, “West African Decorative Weaving,” 26.

<sup>18</sup>Lamb, *West African Weaving*, 175. Similarly, Roy Sieber notes of kete in Eweland, including specialized kete produced in Sόμε, as “among the richest and most complex to be found in sub-Saharan Africa.” See Roy Sieber, “Introduction,” in *History, Design, and Craft*, 9. Doran Ross, too, would celebrate weaving in Sόμε; she notes, “the strip-woven cloth called kente, made by the Asante peoples of Ghana and the Ewe peoples of Ghana and Togo, is the best known of all African textiles.” See Ross, “Introduction: Fine Weaves and Tangled Webs,” 20.

<sup>19</sup>Lamb, *West African Weaving*, 168.

<sup>20</sup>Kent, “West African Decorative Weaving,” 70; Lamb, *West African Weaving*, 169-172.

<sup>21</sup>Kent, “West African Decorative Weaving,” 35; C.A.R. Necku, *From Ketu to Keta: A Short History of Somè* (Agbozume: Livingstone House, 1977), 18.

weaver who would exercise independence and initiative at work. Accordingly, new patterns were invented through experimentation, ensuring development in the beauty of kete. This would combine somewhat with the social value of kete in ensuring the survival of the handicraft in Sόμε. As John Flint and Ann McDougall note of the indigenous textile manufacture in West Africa during the precolonial times:

It was the specialization of pattern, design and colour, and the ‘choosiness’ of the West African customer, which allowed the cloth industry so ably to resist European competition. From 1770, Lancashire factories produced and exported cotton cloth increasingly cheaply; nevertheless, before 1880 they were unable to displace local cloth from the market.<sup>22</sup>

To a great extent, kete symbolizes wealth among the Keta-Sόμεawo and other Ewe people of southern Ghana, particularly during the precolonial times. As such, the cloth is deployed in various social rites to provide aura of importance and value to the occasions. The handwoven cloth features in the installation of new chiefs in Sόμε and elsewhere in Eweland. Thus, some patterns woven in cloths represent statements about the attributes of chieftaincy. An egg representation, for instance, denotes the responsibility and care of the chief in handling his subjects. Other objects of chiefly regalia such as stools, swords and umbrellas are also depicted in the cloth patterns. Kete is also important at religious festivals in Sόμε. The *yeye* festival, for instance, provides an occasion for the display of colourful cloths by the members of the cult, with the essence of portraying the value and importance of the cult.

Similarly, kete features in marriage ceremonies and rites associated with the birth of twins, as well as funeral proceedings. These special roles of *kete* ensure the survival of handloom weaving and its competition with imported foreign cloth prints. Inherently, technological innovations especially in cloth patterning have been instrumental in the continuity of the kete industry in Sόμε. The social function of the cloth is important for the survival of its production. Yet high quality cloth resulting from technological innovations would enhance the social value, as the artistic beauty of the cloth is more important than its use value in the social function. Another factor in the survival of kete involves the ability and effectiveness of the weavers in dealing with inevitable challenges that emerged in the heirloom of kete in Agbozume dominion.

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<sup>22</sup>John E. Flint and E. Ann McDougall, “Economic Change in West Africa in the Nineteenth Century,” in *History of West Africa*, Volume Two, eds. J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (London: Longman, 1987), 382.