MEANINGS OF KENTE CLOTH AMONG SELF-DESCRIBED AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN STUDENTS OF AFRICAN DESCENT

by

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(Under the Direction of Patricia Hunt-Hurst)

ABSTRACT

Little has been published regarding people of African descent’s knowledge, interpretation, and use of African clothing. There is a large disconnect between members of the African Diaspora and African culture itself. The purpose of this exploratory study was to explore the use and knowledge of Ghana’s kente cloth by African and Caribbean and American college students of African descent. Two focus groups were held with 20 students who either identified as African, Caribbean, or African American. The data showed that students use kente cloth during some special occasions, although they have little knowledge of the history of kente cloth. This research could be expanded to include college students from other colleges and universities, as well as, students’ thoughts on African garments.

INDEX WORDS: Kente cloth, African descent, African American dress, ethnology, Culture and personality, Socialization, Identity, Unity, Commencement, Qualitative method, Focus group, West Africa, Ghana, Asante, Ewe, Rite of passage
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DEDICATION

For Isaiah and Lydia.

For my ancestors - those living and those who have transitioned.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The textiles, clothing, and dress of African Americans have been studied repeatedly from slave clothing (Foster, 1997a; Sanders, 2012) to post slavery and contemporary times (Kaiser and McCullough, 2010; Ford, 2013; Cunningham, 2009b). These authors studied African Americans and their style of dress, dress for special occasions, and dress and adornment related to sororities and fraternities (Jones & Holloman, 1990; Holloman, 1990).

There is little literature on the use of African dress and textiles by African Americans and Africans in the United States. Heightened interest in African heritage began during the socio-political environment of the 1950’s. However, it was not until the 1960’s and 1970’s that some African Americans adopted items of African dress and textiles as a means to identify with their African heritage. It was a way to step out of the assimilation into American society and culture, and regain and relearn the African culture and heritage that had been wiped away from them. Activists and entertainers used their notoriety and platforms to further push the idea of African unity in the US and around the world (Tulloch, 1999). In stepping away from American society and culture, African Americans changed the way they dressed and wore their hair, adopted African names, and learned Swahili. Kente, adinkra, and other fabrics were used in clothing, interior design
and accessories to mark this expression (Zack-Williams & Uduku, 2004; Hunt-Hurst, 2013) and to assert their African heritage.

Kente is a traditional cloth of the Asante and Ewe of Ghana and Togo, and has been around since 17 century A.D. (Ofori-Ansa, 2009). It is a strip of fabric made of cotton, traditionally handwoven on a loom by men. Kente was once made of silk, however, due to the care requirements of silk, cotton eventually become the preferred yarn for kente. Kente is typically worn by Asante and Ewe people of Ghana and Togo, rather than other ethnic groups in Ghana. The fabric is worn for ceremonial events and other important and festive occasions.

In the United States, kente cloth is also regarded as a precious fabric. Kente is recognized by many Americans as a cloth of African origin that is used to represent Africa and/or Ghana. There are several examples of its use in the United States.

As kente cloth is Ghana’s national dress, it is used as the costume of Ghanaian Barbie and her African American friend, Asha (Magee, 2005). In 2006, Father Michael Jacques, priest from St. Peter Claver Catholic Church in New Orleans, Louisiana, wore kente cloth during Mass at St. Augustine Catholic Church of New Orleans. Father Jacques, a Caucasian man, wore kente cloth to show honor of Afro-Creole culture and gain Afro-Creoles’ trust by using an African textile as a symbol of his role as a mediator during a socio-cultural battle in New Orleans (Parekh, 2009).

Kente cloth is used in educational settings as a way to teach students about African people and culture (Allen, 2010). For example, a middle school teacher
developed a project for her students to create kente-inspired reduction prints (Cunningham, 2009a). In addition to the cloth itself being used in educational settings, the history and production of the cloth is also being used to teach Ghanaian students how to design, draft and produce the cloth through technology as well as through traditional methods (Badoe & Opoku-Asare, 2014).

African Americans wear the cloth during special life events, such as graduations, inductions into honor societies, and weddings. It is also used in homes as wall art, couch pillows, and bedspreads. A popular symbol is the Golden Stool of the Asante. In the United States, it is a symbol of higher education for African American students. Common colors of kente cloth worn by African American students are blue, black and green. The symbols are often gold or yellow, red, green, and black, the most popular symbol being a gold or yellow stool which for African American students represents the soul of the Asante nation, carried across the Atlantic, making a spiritual and cultural connection between West Africa and the descendants of the African Diaspora.

As an alternative, kente can be purchased as a print. In this case the fabric is mass-produced in a factory. The design is printed onto a piece of solid-colored woven cloth. Printed fabric is not handwoven, which immediately drives down the cost of production. A standard pattern is used in the print, therefore no alternative printed designs are available. Printed kente can be purchased in yards of fabric, or it can be sold as a ready-made garment.
Statement of Purpose

Although woven and printed kente fabrics are widely used by African American students in the US, currently there are no known studies that examine American and African college students of African or Afro-Caribbean descent understanding of its relative meaning and use. The aim of this study was to explore the underlying purpose, meaning, and utilization patterns of Ghanaian kente cloth and prints by this population at two small historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the southeastern United States.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To determine the motivation of African American, Caribbean, and African college students incorporating kente cloth into their daily and/or ceremonial dress.

2. To determine whether African American, Caribbean, and African students know the symbolism and origin of kente cloth.

3. To determine when kente cloth is used by African American, Caribbean, and African college students.

Justification

Graduation is a time to exhibit pride and symbolism - the mortar board, tassel, and academic robe have been worn for centuries to represent a student’s completion of a degree program. Today many students enhance the traditional mortar board, tassel, and
academic robe with objects that represent their culture or origin (P. Hunt-Hurst, personal communication, May 6, 2015). For example, college students with Hawaiian heritage wear flower leis for graduation and those with Mexican heritage wear a stole of fringed fabric similar to the fabric used in a Mexican serape, or gaban. In addition and most pertinent to this research is the wearing of a kente strip by African American students at graduation and other important ceremonies.

**Significance of Study**

This study provides academic, educational and cultural institutions with the ways in which African, African American, and Caribbean students use traditional African textiles. In gaining this insight, various institutions can build relationships with cultural communities to help teach and serve as liaisons between the students and the communities. This research begins to fill gaps in literature and may serve as a bridge for students across the African Diaspora to cross together and begin sharing the differences and similarities within the African, African American, and Caribbean cultures. It also shows what African, African American, and Caribbean students have learned, institutionally or culturally, about Ghana’s kente cloth.

**Limitations of the Study**

African American, Caribbean, and African students who participated in this study were selected on account of convenience. They were students at St. Augustine’s University and Shaw University, two small historically black universities in one city, Raleigh, North Carolina. Students at other types of institutions in the United States or abroad, including
predominately White and Hispanic institutions were not represented in this research. The number of participants, 20, is a limitation. The universities have student populations of about 1,100 and 2,000, respectively.

Other limitations include the ages of the participants; they were between the ages of 18 and 29. There were 20 participants. The participants’ knowledge of what exactly an African textile was also a limitation. The study of only one type of textile, kente, was another limitation.

**Definition of Terms**

African - a native or inhabitant of Africa. (African, 2014).


Afrohispano – Afro-Hispanic, or black person who has adapted to Hispanic culture (Stephens, 1999, p. 9).

Afro-Caribbean - a person of African descent living in or coming from the Caribbean. (Afro-Caribbean, 2015).

Afrolatino – black Hispanic (Stephens, 1999, p. 9). (See Afrohispano).

Dress – in the field of textiles and apparel, a widely accepted definition of dress is “…the total arrangement of all outwardly detectable modifications of the body itself and all material objects added to it” (Calasibetta & Tortora, 2003, p. 130).
Weave - the way in which threads are intertwined to create a fabric. The most common weaves are cloth, twill (and its derivate batavia), and satin (Vergani, 2006, p. 1321).
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter includes a review of literature about the origin and meanings of the symbols, colors, and weaves of kente. It also includes a discussion about African American clothing, Black consciousness, and the theoretical framework used for this study.

Historical Background

Traditional Kente Fabrics and Prints

Origin of kente. With a history as old as the 17th century (Ofori-Ansa, 2009), kente is a woven cloth that is produced on a narrow loom by male weavers in the Asante and Ewe areas of Ghana and Togo. Asante is a region in central and southern Ghana. The Ewe region is smaller than Asante, in the southeastern part of Ghana.

Asante kente is bright in color and intensity, with colors like gold, yellow, orange, blue and red commonly used. Ewe kente is recognized by its muted color palate of browns, greens, blues, reds, oranges, and purples (Dennis, 2004). Both types incorporate cultural symbols such as the golden stool, combs, Adinkra symbols, and other objects into the cloth. Some Ewe kente is made from rayon, rather than cotton yarns (n.a., n.d), while Asante kente was once made of silk is now made of cotton.
To create kente, a woven cloth is made by at least two sets of yarns; one interlaced over the other. The basic fabric that makes up the cloth is a strip. Each strip is about 4 inches in width and 72 or 144 inches in length (Badoe & Opoku-Asare, 2014), depending on whether the end-product will be for a man or woman. There are a few types of kente weaves – single, double, and triple. With each type of weave, the cost increases because the number of yarns and the complexity of the weave increases. The practice of handweaving, size and type of weave affects the cost of kente. Weavers may also add additional designs to the cloth by inserting needle and thread designs at intervals in the length of the cloth (Badoe & Opoku-Asare, 2014).

*Figure 1.* Kente stole showing a basic (single) weave, worn as part of daily dress. 2016. Marisa Tyler, author.
To create enough fabric to be worn as a full garment, the strips of kente are sewn together to create a large piece of fabric that is wrapped around the body. The size of kente worn also denotes economic status. To weave enough fabric for an adult male, the finished product must be about 6 feet by 12 feet. The usual fashion in which men wear kente is wrapped around the body with one shoulder exposed (Ventura, 2012). A woman’s kente garment is smaller and consist of a wrap-around skirt and top.

**Purpose and Meaning.** Most kente strips of cloth include at least two colors and complexity increases as the variety and number of colors of threads used increases. The bright colors, designs, and symbols have significant meanings. They denote one’s place of origin, status, and other characteristics of importance. The colors used in kente represent different virtues. For example, red, black, and white are traditionally reserved for funerals, although black is a common color for use in kente cloth among college students in the United States. Other colors that are popular among US college students are gold, yellow, green, and blue. Respectively, they signify wealth, vitality, renewal and vegetation, and spiritual purity (Kente Cloth, n.d.; Ventura, 2012).

*Figure 2.* Kente fabric showing adinkra symbols, used during funerals. 2016. Marisa Tyler, author.
Figure 3. Two-toned double weave kente stole. 2016. Marisa Tyler, author.

Figure 4. Two-toned double weave kente stole showing underside to show thread placement. 2016. Marisa Tyler, author.
Special color and weave combinations create messages for and about the people for whom each kente cloth is made. For example, on the day he was released from prison, Kwame Nkrumah wore kente cloth with an Mmeeda design. Mmeeda translates to “something unheard of, unprecedented, or extraordinary” or “something that has not happened before.” The Mmeeda design was appropriate for Nkrumah, as he led the Convention People’s Party and won the 1951 elections - the same year he was released from prison. Six years later he would become Ghana’s first President as an independent nation (Philadelphia Museum of Art, n.d., African Imports, 2015; South African History Online, 2014).

As well, symbols represent various meanings and there are many designs used by kente weavers, however, at least eight major designs exist. The tradition of the golden stool is that it floated from the sky into the lap of the first Asantehene, or Asante king, Osei-tutu. It was declared that the soul of the nation resided in the stool (Ghana Web, 2015). Many of the designs are geometric patterns rather than a specific recognizable symbol, like the stool or a comb. Luke-Boone notes that there are over 300 kente patterns. For example, the design know as oyokoman represents “oyoko” which is one of the seven clans of Asante and is recognized as the royal clan and was made for the Asantehene.
Use of kente in West Africa. When worn traditionally, kente strips are sewn together to create a large piece of fabric. Although kente is traditionally woven by men (Ross & Adu-Agyem, 2008), it is worn by both men and women. Men wear this fabric wrapped around the body, similar to how a toga is worn. Women wear kente cloth as a two-piece outfit in the form of a long simple skirt and simple bodice, called a *kaba* and *slit*.

Use of kente in the US: Churches. Kente is also used in religious and spiritual services and rituals. African American churches serve as a notable reference point of African American culture. Many church pastors preach sermons donning long robes - similar to academic robes - and kente sashes placed around their necks as a college graduate would wear the sash (McKinney, 2010; Waggener, 2010). Pastors have worn kente cloth draped around the shoulders to show a spiritual connection between them and
ancestors. Other community leaders have also worn kente cloth stoles, such as Peter Bailey, co-founder of The Organization of Afro-American Unity (CNN, 2015).

**Use of kente in the US: Rites of Passage.** Many colleges and universities across the country hold special ceremonies at which African American students are given a strip of kente cloth (Gibson, 2012; West Chester University of Pennsylvania, 2010; SUNY Cortland, 2011; Loyola Marymount University, 2014; University of Virginia, 2014; Fletcher, 2003). That same cloth is worn by the students during commencement ceremonies (Pearson, 2013). The strip of kente is draped around the shoulders, on top of the graduation gown and under the hood.

**Use of kente in the US: Hip Hop Culture.** African American rapper Queen Latifah wore a kente sash in her 1989 video, “Ladies First,” featuring Monie Love (Owens, Faber, & James, 1989), as did reggae singer Tarrus Riley in one of his publicity photographs. In 2012, R&B singer Elle Varner wore a dress with kente print on it in her “Only Wanna Give It To You” video with J. Cole (Varner, Cole, Felder, Storm, Wansel, Hall, & Williams, 2012).

**Criticisms of kente use in the US** Commercially, kente is used as a popular symbol of African pride. *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines printed many advertisements and interviews which featured kente cloth in the 1990’s and early 2000’s. The majority of this cloth was not true kente cloth, but was an imitation. The cloth featured in these magazines was printed, not hand-woven by Asante or Ewe men (Boateng, 2004). Boateng interviewed some weavers and received their thoughts on printed kente cloth.
Many of them revealed that cultural meanings are lost when printed kente is used. A vendor of Afrocentric goods in Champaign, Illinois distinguishes between clients who want kente and understand the cultural significance of it and those who do not. Boateng argues that the lack of understanding stems from a lack of resources on the history and culture of Africa.

**African Americans and Clothing**

Humans use dress as a means of protection, modesty, adornment, and affiliation with other groups or individuals. Dress is the simplest and most visible way a person can exhibit status. African Americans are known for the use of highly attractive color and styling combinations. African Americans are the largest group of conspicuous consumers and use clothing as a form of validation or compensation for lack of status and power (Kerr, 1990). African Americans inadvertently draw upon a heritage of storytelling and a desire for individuality to create a unique form of dress. Dress allows African Americans to be different from other Americans while fitting in with other African Americans; it allows them to have a culture all their own.

Through clothing, African Americans reveal their group affiliations, status, and desire for attention (Holloman, 1990). One way African Americans derive attention is through bold, attention-grabbing colors, styles, and apparel. This is seen throughout African American culture in daily life and special events. Holloman (1990) explains this in terms of Greek organizations. Similar to certain colors, symbols, and patterns used in kente cloth, Greek organizations also use colors and symbols to identify each other.
Black Conscious Movement on the Discovery of African Clothing

Beginning in the 1960’s African Americans began to make known their desires to “go back to their roots,” or exhibit cultural pride. This stemmed from the racial and social climate that persistently made African Americans feel inferior. As they had been using beauty products to straighten their hair, dressed the way Caucasians did, and learned “proper English,” African Americans were still deemed inferior and were not accepted by Caucasians (Russell, 2008). Many African Americans gave up on living to be accepted by Caucasians and traded in Caucasian American culture for African culture. African Americans came to terms that they were different than Caucasian Americans. By becoming conscious of their differences African Americans embraced themselves and each other. This was done firstly, through apparel and hair. The popularity of Africa-inspired clothing grew and women flaunted their natural hair textures in the 1960’s and 1970’s (Giddings, 1990, Caldwell, 1991). Afros (Giddings, 1990), braids (Ashinger, 1990), and twists were included in the natural look. In the 1980’s, for men, the flat top and designs shaved meticulously into the hair were popular (Ashinger, 1990). With the natural hair movement, women and men have recently resurrected these styles. I believe that as we continue moving into a new age, African Americans will dig deeper into the past to learn who they are and will more and more exhibit African culture in dress, hair, and culture.

The Pan-African flag was adopted in 1920 with the colors of red, black and green. Red represents the blood of those of African ancestry, black represents their skin, and green represents the wealth of the natural resources of Africa. These three colors and
each of their representations were popular in the 1960’s and are still used today in subcultural groups of African Americans. A part of the Pan-African culture, is the celebration of Kwanzaa, which uses the colors red, black, and green, as well as seven symbols that represent the culture of Pan-Africanists. Some of these symbols are similar to adinkra symbols used in kente cloth. Adinkra symbols are used as a form of communication through textiles by the Akan people of Ghana. Adinkra symbols represent the values and spiritual views of the people who wear them (Achampong, 2008). As many African tribes attribute meaning to colors and patterns, so do various groups of today’s African Americans, as evidenced in Greek organizations, rap music collectives, and even groups of friends.

Other Displays of African Heritage in the United States

Beginning in the 1960’s, the dashiki and fez were two African-inspired garments worn by African Americans who wished to assert their cultural pride. They are still worn today by African Americans. The dashiki, or danshiki, is a West African garment made like a long and loose tunic with short sleeves. The hem of the dashiki when worn ends at around the mid-thigh and can be as long as touching the floor when worn as a dress or robe. The dashiki is worn by both men and women, and was introduced to the United States in 1960 by His Royal Highness Oba (King) Ofuntola Oseijeman Adelabu Adefunmi I, former king of Oyotunji African Village in South Carolina (Oyotunji, n.d.). He was born in Detroit, Michigan and, with a strong interest in African culture, began his studies in African religion at age 16. Oba Oseijeman was later initiated into Orisa-Vodun African
priesthood in 1959. Using his knowledge of African culture, the next year Oba Oseijeman began manufacturing the dashiki.

The fez, a northwest African headwear, has its origins in Fez, Morocco. It is also known as a tarboosh or checheya (Clock of Destiny, n.d.). The fez is a hat made of felt with the shape of a bell, flat on top with a tassel hanging down the side of the hat. The most commonly recognized color associated with the fez is maroon. Black and white are the second and third most common fez colors. The fez is still worn today by the descendants of the Moroccan/Moorish Empire in the United States, many who are African American. The fez and the headwrap, specifically, the turban, are West African headwear worn by a growing number of African Americans today. The turban has its roots in Arabic culture and was once worn by Islamic men (Foster, 1997b). With the crossing of cultures, West African women adopted the turban as a form of headdress, and today both African American women descendants of the Moorish Empire and African American women of the natural hair care movement wear turbans. Both are paying homage to West African culture with a West African garment. Another example is seen on the cover of Queen Latifah’s 1989 debut album, *All Hail the Queen*, which included an image of her as poised, warrior-like, and regal with a turban on her head.

In 1988 rap trio Salt-N-Pepa worked its way into the African fashion movement by performing on “Soul Train” wearing kufis with kente-like patterns on them (Hamilton, 2010). The kufi is a short hat without a brim that has a rounded top. It is traditionally worn by elder men in African communities, but with its introduction into African American culture, it has been worn by men of all ages, and some women. Kufi caps are
made from kente cloth, mudcloth, knit and crochet materials. The knitted and crocheted versions have a closer fit to the head. When the kufi is worn with a dashiki, a formal look is attained.

The kanga, an East African garment, was also used as an exhibition of African pride (Giddings, 1990). It is a large piece of printed fabric worn in a multitude of ways - around the shoulders as a shawl, as a sling to carry a child on the back, as a skirt, and many other styles.

**Churches.** During church services, an important aspect of African American culture, African Americans “shout.” Shouting is “a spontaneous emotional and physical activity that indicates the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and unbridled joy of such a presence” (Jones & Holloman, 1990). This is thought to be a tradition passed down through generations via West African culture. It is very similar to two major Latin American religions, Candomble and Santeria, in which supernatural spirits enter the human bodies of the participants and reverence for the spirit world takes place during impassioned ceremonies and rituals. Candomble and Santeria are based in the West African spirituality system of vodun. Other religious displays of African heritage are in voodoo and hoodoo.

**Theoretical Framework**

The culture and personality theoretical framework was used in this study. Culture and personality theory states that culture and personality are interrelated and depend on each other. It is the idea that psychological aspects of an individual are seen within the culture
in which they are part of, and vice versa - culture and socialization plays a major role in forming identity and psychological processes (Kelly, Chao, Scruggs, Lawrence, & Mcghee-Snow, 2009). I applied this theory to this study with the assessment that African and African American material culture and history are not topics that are prevalent in educational institutions, such as colleges and universities. College and university anthropology, art and history programs rarely include courses on African and African American textiles, fashion and history. Many programs, including curriculums starting as early as elementary level, teach material culture and history about various European cultures and subcultures. Programs such as European fashion and history, East Asian studies and centers for Latin American studies exist, while there are little to no existing programs that teach the history of the African continent and its myriad of cultures. Therefore, knowledge of history, art, material culture, i.e., kente cloth of West Africa, is low. I postulated that although African American culture and history are usually separate from American culture and history, African Americans have been “allowed” to have a piece of culture to be passed down throughout generations.

Throughout US history, African Americans have conformed to American culture, yet held on firmly to a piece or pieces of African culture that have been passed down through their own families, learned from celebrations, or learned about from other African Americans. Examples of this would be the headwrap that slave women wore and some African American women wear today as an expression of culture. In the late 1970’s when hip-hop was created, the African custom of call-and-response was adopted by street artists and musicians. As researched in this study, kente cloth has been adopted by
African Americans. Each of these customs are items or aspects of culture that originated in Africa (Scott, 2003; Hamilton, 2010), however, many African Americans who make these a part of their culture do not know or understand the cultural origins and significance behind the customs.

In the context of the history and ethnic population of the United States of America, as compared to those of Africa and the Caribbean, I believe the knowledge levels of African culture and history is lower in the United States. With African and African American culture not being dominate in the US, African Americans are socialized to neglect a large part of inherited African/African American culture and to accept and conform to most of the more prominent European American culture. In Africa and the Caribbean, African culture is dominant and tradition and culture are not sustained for the sake of having culture, but because of the meaning. In African American culture, meaning is lost, while a tradition may be held on to, becoming a hollow tradition, or, tradition for the sake of tradition.

This lack of meaning or understanding of the history of kente follows the culture and personality theory because of the above-stated way in which African Americans are socialized, as compared to Africans and Caribbeans. African Americans are socialized into American culture, with assumptions that African Americans have no culture. With that, the psychological processes of African Americans are bicultural - African Americans live daily lives in the presence of other Americans, but adopt another, passed-down culture in the presence of each other - or acculturated (O’Neal, 1998). Living dual cultures encourages African Americans to adapt and even alter their personalities based
on who they are around. Utilizing cultural objects such as kente cloth, the headwrap, the kufi, the fez, and the daishiki help make a linkage to their African heritage, however, without the understanding of the history and the symbolism only a surface connection is made.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

**Methodology**

For this research, a qualitative method - ethnology - was used. Ethnology’s focus is centered around the study of cultures and their adaptations to changing conditions in the modern world (Creswell, 2005; Ethnology, 2015). Interviews are common in ethnology studies and play a major role in data collection (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Ethnology research is a process that includes either observing or immersing oneself in a culture so as to accumulate data about the specific culture. The researcher may choose to observe without interaction to avoid interfering with the culture being studied. Immersing oneself in the culture is also suitable, as the researcher may feel that they may learn more about the culture by experiencing it firsthand (Arthur, 1998; Freeman, 2007; Glesne, 2011).

Focus groups are simultaneous interviews at one time and place. Focus groups consist of interviewees, with no more than 10 or 12 per group and a moderator. The moderator may or may not be the researcher (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Focus groups contain the same questions as those used in one-on-one interviews. They allow for discussion between the interviewees, and allow interviewees to use each other’s
responses to formulate and re-formulate their thoughts and responses. Focus groups were used for this study because of this reason. The interviewees’ responses served as data for the researcher and education for the participants. The questions were based on the interview guide approach, or semi-structured (Patton, 1987) with open-ended questions. The objectives of the interview questions were as follows.

I. To determine whether African American, Caribbean, and African college students use kente cloth to exhibit their African heritage.

II. To determine whether African American, Caribbean, and African students know the symbolism and origin of kente cloth.

III. To determine when kente cloth is used by African American, Caribbean, and African college students.

Sample

The original sample of this study was intended to include solely participants at the University of Georgia. The international student population that would contain potential African and Caribbean participants is less than 1% and served as a point of doubt for connecting with international students. The percentage of students who classify themselves as African American, or Black, is 8.1%. For ease of conducting the research, to reach more participants, and time and economic restraints, the search for participants was moved to two universities in North Carolina near the researcher’s hometown.
Students of African descent who identify as African American and university students from Africa who attend St. Augustine’s University and Shaw University were interviewed during focus groups. The participants were males and females, aged 18-29. The sample represents African American, Caribbean, and African students who live in the United States of America. The self-identified Caribbean participant revealed she was raised African American, not Caribbean, but still self-identified as such. There were two African participants, representing Ghana and Kenya. This study was not intended to represent African Americans, Afrolatinos, Caribbeans, and Africans who live in other regions of the world.

The focus groups took place on the campus of St. Augustine’s University. Students were recruited for the focus groups using flyers and snowballing. St. Augustine’s and Shaw University are private, historically black, liberal arts universities located in Raleigh, North Carolina’s downtown area. St. Augustine’s is an Episcopal university and was originally established for freed slaves. Shaw University is Baptist and is the oldest HBCU in the Southern United States. Both St. Augustine’s and Shaw’s student populations are 100% and 77% African American, respectively.

Snowballing, or network sampling, helped direct the researcher to African students that otherwise may not have been contacted. Each initial focus group participant referred other students to participate in the focus groups (Glesne, 2011). During the focus groups participants were shown several types of kente cloth.
Description of Instrument

The researcher received permission from the University of Georgia and St. Augustine’s University Institutional Review Boards. Shaw University is a smaller university that does not have its own IRB, however the researcher was granted permission by the IRB at a larger university which supports Shaw University’s research projects. The data for this research was collected using a questionnaire containing demographic questions (Appendix A) and one containing focus group questions (Appendix B).

Data Collection

All of the participants were in Raleigh, North Carolina. Twenty participants were recruited for this research project. Eighteen of those participants were students at St. Augustine’s University and two were students at Shaw University. After signing the consent forms the participants were given a questionnaire regarding their demographics. The purpose of this questionnaire was to learn how students identified themselves and to confirm their age as a requirement to participate in the study. After completing the demographics questionnaire, the discussion began.

The researcher advertised via flyers for about four weeks. Flyers were posted in the most visited buildings on the campus of St. Augustine’s University. These buildings included, Mosee, Boyer, Cheshire, and Hunter Buildings and Seby B. Jones Fine Arts Center, Gordon Health Center, Prezell R. Robinson Library, Penick Hall, Martin Luther King, Jr. Conference Center and Hermitage Hall. As approval for this study on Shaw University’s campus proved more difficult, no flyers were posted on campus. E-mails
were used as recruitment strategies for Shaw participants, as well as word-of-mouth, or snowballing, via St. Augustine participants. No additional recruitment strategies were used and snowballing was more effective in gaining participants than the use of flyers. However, without the use flyers, potential participants would not have been aware of the study.

Consent forms approved by the Institutional Review Board were passed out in each focus group. One questionnaire was used to determine participants’ self-identification. A second questionnaire was used to gauge participants’ knowledge of kente cloth.

At the beginning of each focus group, participants were given a consent form to read and sign. After signing the consent form, two questionnaires were given to the participants. The first questionnaire consisted of demographic information: nation of birth, former nationality (if any), ethnic/regional identification, age, gender, major, and year (in school, i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, master’s or doctoral). The second questionnaire contained questions about the participants’ knowledge of kente cloth. Strips of kente cloth were also displayed and passed around throughout the focus group.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

The majority of the participants were undergraduate students and two were graduate students. All participants were over 18 and were either male or female. Their ages ranged from 18 to 27.

The results of this study were analyzed by integrating grounded theory with the culture and personality theory in the development of themes as the 20 participants answered open-ended questions in focus group sessions. Using a grounded theory approach data were categorized into themes. Once themes were developed, culture and personality theory was used to develop four interdependent theories about the use of kente cloth among students of African descent. After the focus groups, the responses of the participants were coded and categorized. The various themes or concepts, based on participants’ responses, were categorized based on the objectives. After creating categories, the concepts were compared and narrowed down in the form of a secondary, more focused coding. The secondary codes helped build the four theories about the use of kente cloth among the participants.

Theories were created based on a culture and personality theoretical framework. Culture and personality are interrelated and interdependent upon each other. The
participants’ responses indicate that the duality of being an African American - wanting a connection and knowledge of Africa, but hesitating to make a strong connection to Africa based on socialization. I believe that the results of this research with the students at St. Augustine’s University and Shaw University will confirm Boateng’s argument.

**Data Analysis**

Culture and personality theory states that culture and personality are dependent upon each other. Individuals are seen within the culture they are a part of and the culture is a part of the individual. In the case of this study, the participants had been assimilated into dominant American culture. The exception was two African students, from Ghana and Kenya. These two students have lived in America for several years, each, yet have maintained their Ghanaian and Kenyan cultures, although they have incorporated pieces of American culture into their lives. Throughout the focus group they attended they often emphasized their love of their home cultures. At the end of the focus groups participants stated that they would be more inclined to incorporate kente cloth into their daily lives and during other important events at which they otherwise may not have used kente.

After the focus groups, the responses from the students were put into themes according to Arthur (1998), Freeman (2007), and Glesne (2011). The most obviously stated and repetitive themes were as follows.

1. Participants will use kente cloth during university commencement ceremonies.
2. Participants have no knowledge of the history of kente cloth and what the symbols and colors represent.

3. Participants do not incorporate kente cloth into their regular style because they want to fit in with American students of African descent (Black Americans) who do not currently use kente cloth outside of commencement ceremonies.

   Participants do not incorporate kente cloth into their regular style and other important life events because family does not know the history of kente cloth and do not want to feel like outcasts in their families.

4. Participants would like to incorporate kente cloth into their regular style because it would make them feel more unified among Black Americans in terms of giving them a way to exhibit a more African-like culture.

**Theme I: Graduation Ceremonial Use**

Almost all participants said that they would use kente cloth during commencement ceremonies. One student explained she had not really thought about using kente cloth during her commencement ceremony. By the end of the focus group, this student stated that she would use kente cloth when she graduated. When asked why she would like to use kente cloth during graduation, she stated:
By listening to my friends in here, I mean, everybody else is gonna wear it and I want to fit in! And it only makes sense for me to wear something that represents my (African American) culture. It makes me want to learn more about it (kente cloth) and trace my ancestry because if my ancestors are Ghanaian, or at least from West Africa, then I need to be wearing this! (pointed to kente cloth).

The participant from Kenya stated:

Maybe. Maybe I will, just to support my fellow people; even though it is not my culture. I don’t know. I see, and I know, from experience how happy - how good it makes me feel when I see Black Americans wearing things from my culture. So, I would want to give West Africans that same type of happiness. So, maybe. I think I will. Yes, I will.

All other participants said they would use kente cloth during commencement.

The student from Ghana said, “I am going to wear kente from head to toe! Even though it will be covered by my graduation gown, I will still wear it!”

**Theme II: Lack of Cultural and Historical Knowledge**

Most participants did not know what the history of kente cloth was, nor were they familiar with what the colors, symbols, and weaves represent. The participant from Ghana was very knowledgable about kente cloth. She says, “When I came here I wanted to bring my American people some Ghana culture!”
Theme III: Incorporating Kente Into Daily Dress

The only participant that incorporated kente cloth into their daily style was the participant from Ghana. She also revealed that she sells Asante kente cloth from her home and sews her own clothing using kente cloth and other Ghanaian and Nigerian textiles. She says:

It depends on the occasion. I don’t wear it everyday...but I wear it a lot because I miss home. I wear it when I go to church and on special occasions. I sew, so when I make my clothes using kente, I like to add things like Gye Nyame cloth, wax prints, lace cloth; I will also like to add a Sankofa piece and beads to my kente dress. I like to add things like acrylic, jewelry...I just like to stand out. I like it when people come up to me and say, “Oh, I really like your dress or outfit.” That gives me a chance to teach them about my culture....Lace cloth is NOT originally from Ghana - it is Nigerian!

Although this participant said that she does not wear kente everyday, she later explained that being away from Ghana causes everyday to be a special occasion for her but when she is in Ghana everyday is not a special occasion and she does not wear kente as often. Her response is also given in the section of this paper titled, “Objective I.”

One participant said, “I would wear kente cloth everyday but I don’t know how to wear it.”
Another participant said:

I would wear kente cloth but nobody around here sells it! If you want something cultural then you have to go all the way over there to Durham! I feel like that’s not fair....Durham has all the cultural stuff.

A third participant said, “I have a kente bow-tie. My uncle gave it to me and I only wear it on special occasions because I only have one....If I had more kente I would wear it more often.”

When asked about her thoughts on African Americans wearing kente cloth and other Ghanaian textiles, the participant from Ghana said:

No, it does not make me mad to see African Americans wearing kente. Even if they only have a one strip because in Ghana, if you do not have a lot of money, you will at least have a strip of kente. I love to see other people wearing kente; it makes me proud! Because it is my culture and I like to share it. Our (Ghanaian’s’) aim is to bring back the way we dress. A lot of people want to dress like Americans. Our aim is to bring back traditional Ghanaian dress....When people wear kente it lets me know that maybe they are educating themselves on the culture; they are learning and appreciating a culture that is different than their own. It makes me proud to see African Americans wearing kente. They can wear it, of course! Now, if I see that you are wearing kente, like what we wear in Ghana, I will let you know if you are wearing it wrong. I will be polite, but I will
let you know the correct way to wear it. I will let you know if you are wearing it wrong!

**Theme IV: Social Consciousness**

Participants say they would wear kente cloth if it were not for their misinformed family members.

I wouldn’t mind wearing kente cloth, but it’s African and my family thinks anything African is bad and poor because that’s all they ever see about Africa. If I were to wear kente, my family would look at me sideways, like, “Why you wearing that? Who you think you are, African?”, like being African is a bad thing.

**Theme V: Cultural Unity Through Dress**

Participants stated a belief that if people of African descent incorporated kente cloth and prints into dress regularly, that it may strengthen the group’s sense of racial/ethnic unity.

I feel like kente cloth would do the trick, or at least it would make us feel like we are our own nation. I mean, everybody knows where they’re from except us. The best we can do is guess, these days. I feel like the only thing we have to make us feel like one is hip hop - and we ain’t even got that no more!

In regards to this one participant stated, “Kente cloth would make people feel like one group. I would wear it.”
Results and Discussion

To guide the analysis of data collected, culture and personality theory was used. Culture and personality theory states that culture and personality are interdependent. The participants all said that they would use kente cloth during university commencement ceremonies. After the discussion, they said they would use kente cloth during wedding ceremonies and other events in life that are considered milestones. Participants also said that they would be willing to incorporate kente cloth into their daily style.

Objective I

The first objective of this study was to determine whether African American, Caribbean, and African college students use kente cloth to exhibit their African heritage. Many students do not wear kente cloth, and only a couple indicated they do wear it. The participant from Ghana explained that she wears “a lot” of kente:

I wear a lot of kente! I wear it all the time! I try not to wear it on regular occasions and days, but since I am here (in the United States) I wear it to remind me of home. I wear my more expensive kente on special occasions, though - to weddings, to see my family when I go back home. I wear it to church and even on job interviews I will proudly wear my kente. Kente is for special occasions, so I do not wear it everyday; I will only wear a small piece or strip like the African Americans wear. On special occasions I wear everything!
Objective II

To achieve the next objective - to determine whether African American, Caribbean, and African students know the symbolism and origin of kente cloth - participants were asked, “What continent and country is traditional kente cloth associated with?,” “Are you aware of any of its meaning?,” and “Are you familiar with how it is traditionally used in its native context?” Students from other parts of Africa, outside of West Africa, knew that kente is a West African fabric, but did not necessarily know that it is a Ghanaian fabric. Similarly, some African American students knew kente is an African fabric, but did not necessarily know that it is a Ghanaian fabric. Most African American students thought it was a Nigerian fabric. Nigeria is more well-known by African Americans than Ghana and this may be the reason why participants thought kente cloth was a Nigerian fabric. The only self-identified Caribbean student knew it was a Ghanaian fabric but knew nothing more of it because they had been raised in a typical African American style family in the United States.

Objective III

To determine when kente cloth is used by African American, Caribbean, and African college students was the third objective. Most of the participants used kente cloth during high school and college graduation ceremonies. One African student indicated that she uses kente cloth during high school and college graduation ceremonies, as well as other important events, such as weddings, rites of passage, visiting family, church, and funerals. The participant from Ghana stated:
You wear kente on special occasions, but every now and then you will see someone wearing kente, um, just to show that they are rich! They will put it on and wear it and walk around just to show off!

**Presentation of Theory**

The following are proposed theoretical statements based on the data analysis of this study. The theories are not representative of all African American, African and Caribbean students.

1. **African, American, and Caribbean students of African descent use kente cloth during university commencement ceremonies to show unity among the African Diaspora.**

2. **African, American, and Caribbean students of African descent do not know the history of kente cloth because they have become assimilated into the dominant American culture and have neglected to learn about its history for various reasons.**

3. **African and American students of African descent use kente cloth because they acknowledge its connection to Africa.**

4. **American students of African descent do not use kente cloth, outside of commencement ceremonies, because they do not know the full history of kente cloth; they are only aware that it is a West African piece of culture that was passed down to African Americans.**
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of Ghana’s kente by African American, Caribbean, and African students at two universities in the Southeastern US. Recent literature details the use of clothing and dress by African Americans, and textile use by Africans. However, my research links the two cultures together in a way previous research has not. Rather than drawing out differences between the very distinct yet related cultures, my research concerns itself with connecting African American and Caribbean with African. Prior to beginning this study, the assumption was that African American students had no knowledge of kente cloth, its origins and what it represents. Only one student, a Ghanaian was familiar with kente cloth’s history. The Caribbean student had been born of Caribbean parents in the US. She had been raised in the dominant American culture. As the dominant American culture does not recognize African or African American culture, this participant’s lack of knowledge of kente cloth supports the use of the culture and personality theory. The psychological forces at work in the US contribute to African American students knowing more about American culture than African culture. It encourages African American students to assimilate into dominant American culture in order to be successful and appreciated. This research adds
to the body of literature to begin to build the bridge between African and African American cultures. It provides an example of the duality of cultures that African Americans live on a daily basis - that of American and African American.

Kente is a traditional cloth made of cotton yarns woven into strips. The strips are sewn together to create a large piece of fabric that is wrapped around the body. Kente is full of color, symbolism, and heritage. The colors and symbols stand as signifiers of one’s status. Caribbeans and African Americans have inherited the kente cloth from ancestors who were victims of the slave trade. Even without knowledge of kente’s history, it is still held dear to African Americans. The idea that African American students hold on to something of which they know nothing about puts the culture and personality theory to work. It is a piece of ancestral culture that encourages students to wear kente. African American culture is a distinct legacy that has been set apart from American culture, history and tradition. In many cases, according to the participants’ responses, kente helps wearers form individual personalities and identities, while also feeling unified with other cultural members. It helps make them stand out against the typical American student, while psychologically bonding with fellow African American, African, and Caribbean students.

This research reveals the lack of knowledge of the history and usage of kente cloth among non-West African university students. It offers opportunities for education and greater acceptance of kente. The normal use of kente among descendants in the African Diaspora can serve as a bridge and symbol of ethnic unity.
Major Findings

1. Participants use kente cloth only during high school and university ceremonies.

2. Non-West African participants had no knowledge of the history of kente cloth and its associated colors and symbolism.

3. Participants do not incorporate kente cloth and prints into their regular dress style because they fear rejection by other Americans and students of African descent, who also do not wear such clothing and prints.

4. Non-West African participants do not incorporate kente cloth into their regular dress style and other important life events because its use was not associated with their family’s native cultural heritage, or understood by their families of origin.

Limitations

Participants were chosen for this research on account of convenience. They were students at St. Augustine’s University and Shaw University. These two universities are located in downtown Raleigh, North Carolina within 15 minutes of each other. Although students were from various cities such as Raleigh, North Carolina, Atlanta, Georgia and Chicago, Illinois, and two were from Africa - Ghana and Kenya - the participants represent a very small portion of African, American and Caribbean students in the southeast United States. The African American and Caribbean students had assimilated
into American culture, while the African students maintained their cultures. Even though the African American students had assimilated, they revealed that they had longings to learn African culture, such as wearing the kente cloth.

Other limitations include the ages of the participants; they were between the ages of 18 and 27 and only represent that age group. The study of one type of African textile, kente, is another limitation. As one student was from Kenya, she was not familiar with kente cloth, but offered her input on textiles indigenous to her Kenyan culture.

We wear the dashiki. Not as a top, just as a cloth wrapped around the body. That is our traditional dress....The reason we wear the dashiki is because some (Kenyan) people went to West Africa and, you know, brought back the dashiki. We...mostly village women wear dashiki but sometimes women in general wear the dashiki. We also have kitenge. Kitenge is used for many things, but mostly for weddings....You can use kitenge to wrap your head, or you can wrap it around the top of your body like a shirt, or around the bottom like a skirt. You can wear it as a dress or wear it on your body to carry your child....You can do this because it is a fabric, it is a big fabric, just like here when you go to the fabric store and buy fabric? You can do anything with that fabric. You can do anything with kitenge. But, like I said, it is used mostly for weddings. If you can afford it.
Recommendations for Further Research

1. An in-depth study could be proposed of African, African American and Caribbean students’ attitudes towards the stripping of African and African American culture in American society. One participant expressed frustration at how he and others had no knowledge of kente cloth history. He began to talk about how slave Africans in America had their culture suppressed, and thus were not able to pass down African culture to their African American descendants. This frustration resonated with other focus group members.

2. The study could be expanded to include African, African American, and Caribbean students at other colleges and universities across the nation, as well as colleges and universities in Africa and the Caribbean.

3. An expanded study could include people who are not college or university students.

4. An inclusion of other African textiles would be beneficial to study. Participants show interest in using African textiles to connect with each other and the legacy of their people.
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APPENDIX A

Demographics

1. Nation of Birth _____________________

2. Former Nationality _____________________

3. Ethnic/Regional Identification
   a. African American
   b. African
   c. Caribbean/West Indian
   d. Other _____________________

4. Age _____

5. Gender _____

6. Major _________________________________________________________

7. Year Freshman

           Sophomore

           Junior

           Senior

           Master’s/Ph.D.
APPENDIX B

Focus Group Questions

Knowledge/Use of Kente

Part I: Objective I: To determine African American, Caribbean, and native African undergraduate college students’ observations and use patterns of traditional kente cloth (or prints) into their dress in their family, cultural, and/or community practices.

1. Students, at times, incorporate traditional kente cloths (or prints) on their collegiate graduation regalia. Do you plan to incorporate such kente cloths (or strips) over your robe during your ceremony? If so, why? If not, why not?

2. The display of traditional kente cloth in the form of strips have become increasingly common during school graduations. Were you and others permitted to adorn your gown with such strips during your high school graduation ceremony? If so, why? If not, why not?

3. Some incorporate the use of kente cloth (or prints) into special cultural events or milestones, such as graduation, church, and holidays. Have you used kente cloth (or prints) and seen others incorporating its use? If so, what events?

4. Have any of your family members incorporated the use of kente cloth (or prints) during any special cultural events or milestones, such as graduation, church, and holidays? If so, who was the member, what was the occasion, and what was its significance?

Part II: Objective II: To determine African American, Afro-Caribbean, and native African college students’ awareness and knowledge related to the symbolism and origin of traditional kente cloth (or prints) at a research university in the deep South.

1. Fabrics originate from different parts of the world. What continent and country is traditional kente cloth associated with?

2. The colors in kente cloth (or prints) have significance. Are you aware of any of its meaning?
3. Kente cloth (or prints) are generally used in different events. Are you familiar with how it is traditionally used in its native context?

Part III: Objective III: To determine the use pattern of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and African college students of kente cloth at a research university in the deep South.
1. Do you incorporate kente cloth (or prints) into your regular style of dress? If so, how?
2. Do you incorporate kente cloth (or prints) into your dress for special occasions? If so, when?
3. How often do you wear kente cloth (or prints)?

Part IV
1. What other items do you wear to express your heritage? (Kufi, ankh, dashiki, etc.)
2. Who/what influenced you to wear kente and/or other items of heritage?
3. How does kente cloth and/or other items of heritage make you fit in your community/culture? How do they make you stand out as an individual?
4. How African American/African/Caribbean/Other do you feel?