

Smock Fashion Culture in Ghana's Dress Identity-Making

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Abstract

This paper delves into the historical origin, the types of smocks and the notion of colours that characterize smock production in Northern Ghana. It uncovers the philosophical connotations of its usage and the attendant aesthetical powers of an indigenous cloth that served in one sense as a silent metaphorical unifier between northern and southern part of Ghana and in other sense to signal the return to self-governance as a result of its usage and appearance in a turning point of Ghana's independence struggle. The article uses historical narrative and visual analytic approaches.

Keywords: Smock, identity-making, fashion, dress, indigenous cloth

1. Introduction

Smock fashion culture in pre-colonial, colonial, postcolonial and modern day Ghana will forever remain indelible for its outstanding historical sweep and aesthetical clout in Ghanaian new identity-making. For nothing at all, the word 'smock' throws up lasting memories of the eve of Ghana's independence at the Old Polo Grounds in Accra where Nkrumah, the hero, shed tears of joy in proclaiming the country's independence. Far apart from the dramatic moments of the independence proclamatory euphoria that night, the simple but fashionable costuming of himself and his compatriots charged the atmosphere and set the pace for the search and construction of a true African Ghanaian dress identity. Of all his global trotting to different parts of the world Nkrumah and his fellows could have chosen a completely Eurocentric dress or a dress from any other parts of the world for that momentous occasion. But to rewrite the misconstrued history of Africans as people without history, Nkrumah looked inward in search for a typical indigenous dress fashion antithetical to Hegel's groundless argument of portraying Africans as people without history. According to Botwe-Asamoah (2005, p.51) Nkrumah's address to the national assembly on July 10, 1953 hammered on the dress cultural advancement of the old Ghana Empire that existed till the eleventh century long before colonialists' invasion. Nkrumah was reported to have said that, in that empire, "the inhabitants of Ghana wore garments of wool, cotton, silk and velvet".

Choosing smock and caps with trousers combination as a formal costume for a ceremony attended by an estimated crowd of hundred thousand (Biney, 2000) plus hundreds of distinguished invited African American dignitaries and other invitees from the African continent was symbolically unique in appearance and unifying in character. The wearing of the smock in that function projected that costume as a national dress in addition to the toga-like costuming involving the draping of large piece of cloth around the body with or without white round-necked short sleeves shirt combination that has characterized presidential swearing in ceremonies in Ghana since 1957 (Essel & Opoku-Mensah, 2014). Symbolically, it signified a break away from the shackles of colonialism (Botwe-Asamoah, 2005), served as "a dress cultural visual aesthetic order", and promoted the use of made in Ghana clothing (Essel, 2014, p.52). To African Americans and other peoples of African descent present at the ceremony, it was a great occasion to celebrate the birth of a new African nation (Biney, 2011).

Biney (2011) makes a comparison of the Northern smock to Asante Kente which many, if not all Nkrumaists, would disagree. In her view, the choice of the smock "was considered the archetypal dress of the common man, particularly the northerner, as opposed to the privileged Kente attire of the Asantehene and his royal court." She claims "Nkrumah and his ministers were sending out an unambiguous symbolic image and message of their allegiance to the common man of the newly independent nation-state." (p. 77) In our minds, Biney's comparison defeats the very essence of Nkrumah's preference to Northern smock in commemoration of the independence of the then new nation-state. As kente was valued and revered initially as the preserve for chiefs, royals, priests and priestesses in the southern part of Ghana, the same way smock was valued and perceived up north. A heroic unifier like Nkrumah obsessed with African unification thought, had a challenge to unite his home country Ghana populated with over "ninety multi-ethno-linguistic groups" (Essel, 2014, p.46) and use that as a lynchpin in bringing Africa together as one. He would by no means look down on smock as a cloth for the common man, let alone associate the 'Northerner' as a common man as portrayed in the estimation of Biney. This would have portrayed him as a man with divisive character rather than what he actually stood for as

a saviour and a unifier. Using the smock rather assisted in the bonding of savannah north to the costal south. Even his first monumental freestanding statue formerly mounted in front of Ghana's old Parliament House was mimetic of his smock costuming on the midnight of March 6 1957 (Essel, 2014).



Figure 1: Kwame Nkrumah and his fellow compatriots wearing smocks during 1957 Independence Day Declaration in Accra.

Costumed in smocks, caps and shirts with trousers combination, Nkrumah and his fellow pan-Africanist compatriots (Figure 1) namely Kojo Botsio, K. A. Gbedemah, Archie Casely-Hayford, Krobo Edusei and N. A. Welbeck stood on the podium as Nkrumah declared independence. The smock became a symbol of class, a political dress and enjoyed unequalled patronage since its purposeful public usage by Nkrumah and his fellows. Its patronage also grew among Ghanaians and many African Americans. In search for their true Afrocentric identity in Western destinations, African-Americans resorted to the celebration of their own created festivals modeled to imitate those from the African origins. It includes Kwanzaa (celebrated in December 26 to January 1 annually) and Black History Month (in February). Boateng (2004, p.216) observes that during the celebration of these festivities, African-Americans parade in African clothing (such as Kente and Fugu) and or Western ones with African accessories in constructing their identity. She writes: "During the celebration of both Kwanzaa and Black History Month, African Americans wear different kinds of African clothing, or simply accent Western clothing with accessories made from African fabrics and jewelry that use motifs and materials originating from or associated with Africa." Throwing the spotlight on smock fashion culture to study how it was used in creating the quintessential African Ghanaian identity remains paramount.

2. Historical Origin of Smock in Ghana

The word "Batakari" is a Hausa parlance that literarily means 'outer gown' (M. Issah, pers. communication, November 26 2014). This implies that it is an exterior robe-like garment worn over inner garments. The garment received impressive embroidery decorations especially at the front part, and was probably Nupe or Hausa manufacture (Renne, 2004) of which some of the fabric colour scheme resembles the plumage of guinea fowl (as in figure 2a). *Batakari* may consist of a flowing outer gown, long sleeve inner robe and a trouser collectively referred to as three-piece wear. 'Fugu' on the other hand means cloth in Mossi language (Ahiabor, 2013). It is a word 'used to describe a variety of loose garments sewn from strips of cloth woven on traditional looms in Northern Ghana.' (Tettehfiio, 2009, p.109) These words *Batakari* and *Fugu* have, however, been used interchangeably to mean smock in modern Ghanaian language and have become synonymous among Ghanaian fashion scholars and users. The Dagombas refer to smocks as *Bingmbaa*.

There are differing schools of thought with regards to the exact origin of smocks in Ghana. Some say the 'Tang' people in the Karaga district were original weavers who migrated to Kpatinga village in the Gushegu district of Northern region (S. Alhassan, pers. communication, November 27 2014)). They add that the craft began as woven stripe of fabric for covering their nakedness. Others maintain that the part of the Mossi ethnicity in Burkina Faso who migrated to settle in the Northern Ghana came with the craft. Ahiabor (2013) and Tettehfiio (2009) hold forth that before the migration of the Mossis, they were engaged in barter trade system from Upper Volta to the North. Heathcote (1979) testifies that from about 8th Century A. D. the Hausas in Nigeria were well established in the trade exportation of hand-woven fabrics in parts of West Africa. Allman (2004, p.146) reports that the Talensi, Builsa, Nankanni, Dagara, and several others did not weave cloth, but wore skins, waist beads and leaves to cover their genital areas. However, they "ran from west to east, bisecting the complex of Mossi-

Dagomba kingdoms to the north and south” and were considered naked by these kingdoms trading in woven cloths. From Allman’s assertion the Mossi traders and settlers were probable first custodians of the smock weaving craft. With all the variations in tracing the exact historical account of smock production and usage culture in Ghana, the overriding truth remains that Ghana is “composed of mosaic of ethnic cultures which trace their origin within and outside Africa” and possibly settled with those artistic prowess in weaving and other artistic legacies (Essel & Opoku, 2014, p.31). It could be also be estimated that the acculturation, enculturation and transculturation of smock weaving popularized the art in the savannah north of Ghana namely Upper East, Upper West and Northern regions.

3. Types of Dagomba Smocks

Smocks are fashioned in different styles. Its expressive sartorial design orientation, peculiar coarser hand-woven characteristic, vertical running stripes and thicker plain weave structure distinguishes it from other hand-woven fabrics. Traditionally, the hand spun yarns were used but their dwindled production has called for the use of machine spun yarns in the production of smock fabrics. To achieve the fuzzy and weighty smock fabric effect engineered by the reliance on handspun yarns, weavers used plied yarns or combine two or more stands of yarns in constructing the fabric. This adds weighting to the fabric and ensures evenness in comparison to using the handspun yarns. Nonetheless, most savannah north indigenes prefer and consider smocks woven with handspun yarns for its uniqueness and authenticity. Subjecting smock fabrics made of handspun yarns to critical visual inspection reveals fuzzier surface quality and ajour (pattern of tiny holes) appearance. Apart from the yarn production mechanism and the smock fabric production done on traditional looms, the sewing could be purely hand sewn, machine sewn or a combination of both. All these affect the classification of Dagomba smocks. A smock could, therefore, be classified as *hand sewn*, *machine sewn* or a *combination of hand and machine sewn*. It may also be classified according to purpose. Another criterion for the classification is by looking at its elegance of cut and sartorial design orientation. This criterion takes into consideration the appearance and presentation style including the embroidery decorations, design patterns and matching accessories. By these approaches Dagomba smocks are classified into:

1. Yanshichi/Dansichi [pronounced **Yansichi/Dansichi**] (sleeveless smock)
2. Bingmbaa Bari [pronounced **Bingmaa B̄r̄ɛ**] (smock with sleeves)
3. Kpaakuto (smock with wide and large sleeves)
4. Sandan Yibu (meaning ‘leaving early morning’)
5. Yebili [pronounced **Yebili**] (for title holders)
6. Kparigu (chiefs’ smock for enskinment)

Generally, most smocks are sewn to appear as loose garments to allow fresh air to circumnavigate around the body. This makes its typically heavy fabric characteristics unproblematic to wearers because it does not accumulate much heat to make wearers feel less comfortable in wearing. Some smock types are fashioned with kilt-like characteristics. They include Yanshichi (Figure 2a and 2b), Bingmbaa Bari (Figure 3), Kpaakuto (Figure 4) and Sandan Yibu. The vertical pleats cause the garments to form interesting draperies depending on the activity and posture of the wearer. For instance, in a walking posture, the garment swings rhythmically creating a sense of movement while its loose nature imposes in wearers a loftily proud gait and self-confidence. In a typical Northern swinging dance, the smock garment swirls in dramatic style, adding beauty to the dance performance.



Figure 2a: Sample of Yanshichi smock.



Figure 2b: Man dressed in Yanshichi.



Figure 3: Bingmbaa Bari.



Figure 4: Kpaakuto.

Yanshichi (Figure 2a) is a sleeveless upper body smock with usually loose and wide sideways openings from which the arms appear. It has no sleeves but its generally oversized shoulders-to-shoulder dimensions armours it with slight overhangs that shelters the upper part of the arms and create a sense of sleeves. Yanshichi, therefore, has no inherent sleeves but inherit sleeves when worn (Figure 2b). What makes Bingmbaa Bari (Figure 3) different from Yanshichi is the addition of sleeves. Though the sleeves used in the design are actually short sleeves, the dimensional extension of shoulders-to-shoulder length, loose sizes of smocks and wide sleeves stretches to cover two-thirds length of the arms and gives it an almost long sleeve characteristic when worn.

The lengthwise dimension of Kpaakuto (Figure 4) stretches to and or beyond the knee level. A peculiar feature of it is its wide and large sleeves size that may be equivalent to two-thirds of the entire vertical length of the garment. When worn, the loose nature of the sleeves makes it extend to the lower part of the legs (Figure 4). The expression *Sandan Yibu* literally translates 'leaving early morning'. This type of smock has little or no gathers and may be sewn with non-smock fabrics. It could also be described as a Yanshichi without gathers. During traditional festive occasions such as festivals and enskinment of chiefs, drummers wear this type of smock. Among the Dagombas, *Sandan Yibu* is a cheap casual wear. *Yebili* smocks are markers of class and signals royalty, opulent lifestyle, financial wealth, power and, often, patronized by the upper-class. It receives elaborate decorative embroidery at both front and back sides. Structurally, the vertical length of its wide sleeves corresponds to the actual lengthwise dimension of the smock. The length depends on the preference of the wearer as it could extend beyond the knees (Figure 5). By classification according to purpose, Kparigu smocks remain the preserve of Northern chiefs and the most supreme dress during enskinment of chiefs. This type of smock is traditionally worn twice in the life of a chief: during enskinment and on the day of his death, the

second, for burial. It is often creamy or white in appearance with no ornamental embroidery decorations and only exposes the head and neck regions of the wearer. Kparigu smock shares similar structural characteristics with Yebili. What differentiates it from Yebili is its creamy or whitish colour scheme; stretching dimensions to cover greater portions of the body excluding only the head and neck regions; respect for no embroidery designs and the enskinment purpose for which it is used. Any of these smock types fortified with talismanic condiment is referred to as *Gbaano* (literally meaning juju). Dagomba warriors led by the *Kabon Naa* or *Sapashene* (chief warrior) wear Gbaano as outer garments while chiefs and other individual wear it as inner garment all for the purpose of protection. In most cases, Gbaano acts as mystical bulletproof garment.



Figure 5a: front view of Yebili smock sample.



Figure 5b: back view of Yebili smock sample.

4. Way of Wearing Smocks

The indigenes of these regions have distinct way of wearing their smocks to showcase its functional eclectic and aesthetic impulse. Traditionally, a Dagomba may wear more than one (sometimes up to six) with the mini-sizes down and the bigger ones on top of the others. This may connote riches, power, royalty or resilience. Wearing a number of smocks at a time helps to give shape that adds to the draperies in the smocks. Irrespective of the number of smocks worn at a time, wearing smocks such that the round tips are at par rather than either the front or the back part hanging too low or high is most preferred by the indigenes of northern Ghana.

5. Notion of Colours in Smock Production





Unlike the Akan of southern Ghana (Antubam, 1963), colours used in smock production in northern part of Ghana have no symbolic connotations. Colours are, therefore, used arbitrarily irrespective of the occasion. Any colour of smock may be worn for a funeral or merry-making festivity without recourse to choice of colour and affect. Both weavers and tailors choose colours based on their aesthetical appeal. One of the modern trends in the use of colours in smock production is the preference of using political party colours in smocks. For instance, the New Patriotic Party activists sometimes wear smocks depicting their party colours (red, blue and white) and the Progressive People Party, red and white colours.

6. Smock Caps Wearing and Meaning Making

Smock caps are accompanying accessories worn to compliment the beauty of the wearer. When worn with matching smocks its deep spectacular folds turn to attract more intense observation and appreciation thereby revealing greater aesthetical connections of the entire dressing combination. Notwithstanding their praiseworthy spectacles, they offer metaphorical information whose decoding could land the wearer into trouble in the

northern territories of Ghana, especially, at the durbar or in the presence of a chief or a superior. The caps are worn in four major distinctive styles: in stiff standing position, oblique postures (either towards right or left), skewed towards the front, and skewed posture towards the back of the head. Each of the four styles has its symbolic meaning. The stiff and erect positioning of the cap means supremacy and oblique style towards right or left signifies peace. Cap with frontal skew denotes humility or servitude while backwards skew depicts strength or spiritual powers. These meanings are tabulated in the table 1.

Table 1: Styles of Wearing Smock Caps

Cap Style	Illustration	Symbolism/Meaning
Stiff standing position		“I stand tall”, except God, supremacy, superior ruler, no co-equal
Oblique postures (either towards right or left)		“no trouble”, peace, harmonious living, unity
Skew towards the front		Leadership, no coequal
Skewed posture towards the back of the head		“I have followers”, strength, spiritual powers, spiritual resiliency, good wrestler

7. Conclusions

The study has revealed that in the construction of African Ghanaian identity in the country’s struggle for independence, Nkrumah used the smock fashion culture associated with the three northern regions (Upper East, Upper West and Northern Regions) of Ghana. Additionally, the smock served as a unifier between north and south parts of Ghana as one people despite their multiethnic backgrounds. It is also evident from this article that smock fashion culture as in the northern part of Ghana (Upper East, Upper West and Northern Regions) has interesting philosophical connotative and denotative undertones and above all a rich aesthetic fragrance that has fuelled its production and global patronage. Smock production culture has been in existence in Ghana for over four centuries with little modification in terms of design and use of modern tools in doing mass production. There is the need for industrial production of smock fabrics to free them from their conventional hand-woven practice. Automated power looms necessary for weaving intricate and simple smock fabrics must be developed. Ghanaian fashion designers must study the smock types and use as source of inspiration for their designs.

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