

**Exploring Identity: The Art of El Anatsui
and Kwesi Owusu-Ankomah**

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Introduction

In many African nations including Ghana, textiles and the techniques used to make them are integral to everyday life and artistic expression. *Kente*, , and *adinkra* cloths are used for everyday attire, as was bark cloth at one time; Fante Asafo flags are textiles used in festivals. These cloths use bright colors, intricate patterns, and symbols to express many facets of human experience including emotions, events, social structures, and collective identities. The works of many contemporary Ghanaian artists engage with the characteristics of textiles and the experiences textiles represent; artists El Anatsui (b. 1944) and Kwesi Owusu-Ankomah (b. 1956) use these characteristics and experiences to explore issues and ideas that affect their lives today.

I am interested in how artists appropriate aspects of the textiles to make art that explores contemporary issues; Anatsui and Owusu-Ankomah use textiles to explore conditions of the world including history and slavery, diaspora and global exchange. These textiles visually mark the importance of textile practices from the Asante, Ewe, and Fante peoples of Ghana to their artistic identity. For the purposes of this paper I define artistic identity as how a person views him or herself as an artist. In Ghana, textiles are used to communicate visually and to represent the identities of groups and individuals. From my personal experience in Ghana I found that the peoples and cultures that make up the country are varied and distinct; though almost everyone engaged in some way with the ways textiles could convey that identity.¹ Moreover, I found that even when in areas that didn't have strong kente traditions, people were aware of and engaged with in the meanings of it

¹ It is important to note that Ghana is a diverse place and that the identities of Ghanaians vary by community.

nonetheless². At the same time, *adinkra* symbols appeared on textiles throughout the Southern Ghana areas where I conducted my fieldwork during the summer of 2009. Not only did I observe the importance of textiles to Ghanaians in general, I learned about them from Ghanaians who made them. Additionally, I experienced what it was like to create *kente* and *adinkra* cloths firsthand which helped me to understand and appreciate their production, and the ways that production helps establish meanings for the textiles.

Anatsui and Owusu-Ankomah appropriate the communicative function of textiles and the messages regarding identity that they carry. To demonstrate this, I will discuss the following works of art. In “Kente Rhapsody” (2002, Figure 1) Anatsui uses creative techniques that reference *kente* and bark cloth to discuss a common history of the people of Anatsui’s homeland as well as the importance of Asante and Ewe artistic practices to his artistic identity. In “Healer” (Figure 2) Anatsui expands his subject matter to look at global connections between Ghana, Europe, and the Caribbean. In this piece Anatsui visually references the symbolic meanings of *kente* to discuss how global contact has influenced aspects of his artistic identity. And, in “Movement No. 39” (2004, Figure 3) Owusu-Ankomah uses *adinkra* symbols, Fante Asafo flags, and figures to discuss the importance of global cultural exchange, diaspora, and Ghana to his artistic identity. Each of these pieces is representative of the artist’s larger body of work as they both produce multiple pieces in the

² More recently, *kente* cloths have developed international meaning. They have been appropriated by many organizations such as the Pan African and Black Nationalist movements. *Kente* has been used as a tool for advertising or promotion in a variety of ways ranging from expressions of “Black Pride” to imbuing commodities including AT&T phone services with qualities of truth, heritage, and history. *Kente* is now a symbol of Africa, African Heritage, the African diaspora, and African history. Ross and Abgenyega, *Wrapped in Pride*, 56.

same style and materials. Therefore these detailed discussions of them serve to engage these artists' practices and concerns.

I begin this paper with a discussion of El Anatsui and his exploration of Ghanaian history and slavery. In this section I discuss how Anatsui references textiles such as *kente* cloths and bark cloth. In section two I discuss the artwork of Owusu-Ankomah and explore his artwork and its references to *adinkra* cloth and Fante Asafo flags. In my conclusion I compare and contrast the processes and themes of the two artists.

“Kente Rhapsody”

El Anatsui's piece “Kente Rhapsody” (2002) is made of tropical hardwood and tempura. “Kente Rhapsody” (Figure 1) symbolizes both a common history of the people of Anatsui's homeland as well as the importance of Asante and Ewe artistic practices to his artistic identity.³ This is evident through the visual references to several different Ghanaian textile practices and the title itself.

The sculpture's construction is reminiscent of the Asante and Ewe textile, *kente* (Figure 4), in which long, narrow sections of cloth are sewn together (Figure 5) to create the large, cohesive whole of the *kente*; the combined slats of “Kente Rhapsody” are composed of narrow, vertical pieces of wood that are decorated with patterns. These slats are combined to create a larger pattern that is unified by color and repetition. In one interpretation of this work, Simon Ottenburg argues the wood symbolizes the different communities and peoples

³ Anatsui was not exposed to Ewe culture as a child because he grew up in a missionary compound which essentially rejected Ewe traditions and practices. He later chose to study and engage with it in college. Simon Ottenburg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven artist of the Nsukka group* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press in association with the National Museum of African Art, 1997), 155.

within each country of Africa.⁴ I argue for a more specific interpretation. Each slat represents a different people within Ghana; while all have unique characteristics they come together to form a cohesive whole. This coming together to create this whole is voluntary just like the pieces of wood come together are not forced into connection with one another; they are simply placed side by side, and not held together visually by a beam or some other system of support. Additionally, each wood slat has unique characteristics and is individually beautiful, much like how *kente* strips can be viewed and appreciated individually but are also beautiful as part of the large cloth.

The patterns and colors of “Kente Rhapsody” are much like those of *kente* which are generally colorful and often use greens, browns, reds, yellows, and blues. Pastels and shimmering threads have been introduced into the patterns in recent years due to the development of synthetic materials.⁵ In “*Kente Rhapsody*” the length of each piece of wood is covered by black diagonal lines; the lines are interrupted by a section of yellow and red paint one-third of the way down the sculpture. The spaces between the black diagonal lines are alternately filled with either a red wood color or by additional red, blue, purple, green, or yellow lines. The colorful lines divide each part of the sculpture into sections as follows: black lines and wood color, black lines and colorful lines, a yellow section, black lines and wood, black lines and colorful lines, and finally black lines and wood. This creates another visual connection to *kente* cloth and strengthens the relationship between his sculpture and *kente* cloth. Additionally, it is important to note that the unevenness of the yellow section, one fourth of the way down the piece, is reminiscent of handmade cloth. Like a hand-woven

⁴ Ottenberg, *New traditions from Nigeria*, 166

⁵ Kojo Fosu. *Traditional Art of Ghana*, (Kumasi: Dela Publications and Design Services, 1994), 41.

textile, the squares are not uniform in size or shape; this represents the handmade cloth that was produced prior to European contact. This is important because it shows that he is referencing a textile that was uninfluenced by European contact and is more purely Asante and Ewe. In offering *kente* as a strong visual motif, Anatsui underscores the importance of Ghana to his artistic identity.

Such underscoring might also be seen in the choice of material; wood may reference bark cloth. Bark cloth (Figure 6) was an important textile in Ghana prior to the 1950s. Thus, bark cloth survived the slave trade; it is a pre-colonial Ghanaian tradition that did not die out because of European contact.⁶ Anatsui has discussed the importance of going back to one's roots by incorporating parts of traditional arts. He offers "... there are always elements of an invading culture which stay behind; you cannot obliterate it completely because every culture has its positive aspects."⁷ By referencing bark cloth in the material and *kente* in the visual and structural composition of this work, Anatsui employs those elements of culture that were not obliterated through European contact and asserts them as vital to his artistic practice. Nevertheless, there are elements of European contact that stay behind and he addresses those as well in this piece.

Through Anatsui's artistic process in creating "Kente Rhapsody" he discusses the effects of the slave trade and colonialism on Ghana. Anatsui uses acetylene torches, chain saws, plumber's hole saws, and wood routers to burn, cut, distort, and manipulate his pieces.

⁸ For example, in the midsection of "Kente Rhapsody" there are a series of squares. Each square has a circular indentation at its center that is carved out of the slat of wood. The wood

⁶ Mato, "Clothed in Symbol", 129

⁷ El Anatsui, *Sankofa: Go Back an' Pick. Three Studio Notes and a Conversation* (London: Kala Press, 1993), 31-32, Quoted in Gerard Houghton, *El Anatsui and the Transvanguard* (London: Saffron Book, 1998), 32.

⁸ Ottenberg, *New traditions from Nigeria*, 164

is unevenly cut and placed and none of the sections are exactly aligned. This imparts the piece with an organic, natural feeling. Ottenberg suggests that, the mark left by the rough edges of the chain saw is “savage;” it can only be “civilized” by scorching it with fire.⁹ Here Anatsui comments on the history of Ghana. Europeans ignorantly thought of Africans, and thus Ghanaians, as primitive and uncivilized; they believed that their mission throughout Africa was to “save” and “civilize.” Fire also adds hardness to the wood much like colonialism added hardship to the lives of many Ghanaians.¹⁰ Additionally, chain saws and fire can connote aggression and violence. The chain saw is loud and both tools are destructive. European—especially Dutch and English—contact with Ghana was often violent and I agree with Ottenburg’s interpretation that Anatsui chooses these violent methods to explore colonialism and the violent history of the slave trade. Anatsui imposes violent actions onto his once-living materials. This is a clear reference to the slave trade, as many individuals were powerless to stop the violence and enslavement.

The title, like the rest of the piece, has multiple meanings. As with many slats of the piece that serve as a symbol of the common histories of Ghanaians, so too does the title of “Kente Rhapsody”.. A musical rhapsody is “an instrumental composition irregular in form and suggestive of improvisation,”¹¹ which may describe the manner in which the piece was conceived or created. “Kente Rhapsody” is composed of variously shaped and sized slats of wood that come together to make a coherent whole and a beautiful composition. Like the irregular musical elements of rhapsody, the communities of Ghana are not of uniform size or composition.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dictionary.com Unabridged, “Rhapsody,” Dictionary.com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/rhapsody>.

The title of the piece also demonstrates the importance of Ghana to Anatsui's personal identity. Another definition of rhapsody is "an ecstatic expression of feeling or enthusiasm".¹² The word "rhapsody" combined with "*kente*" suggests that he is ecstatic and passionate about Asante and Ewe textile practices. All this, it shows that he is proud of his homeland and that *kente* is important to his artistic identity.

"Healer"

Whereas "Kente Rhapsody" examined a common Ghanaian history, Anatsui expands his subject matter in "Healer" (Figure 2) to look at global connections between Ghana, Europe, and the Caribbean. Like "Kente Rhapsody," "Healer" visually references the social meanings of *kente* to express its message. In "Healer" Anatsui also references his personal history and important aspects of his artistic identity to discuss how he has been influenced by global contact.

The materials of "Healer" allude to *kente* and European contact with Ghana. "Healer" is a large, rectangular sculpture composed of wire, liquor bottle labels, and liquor bottle caps (Figure 7). The vibrant reds, blacks and yellows in "Healer" are especially reminiscent of the most prevalent colorings of *kente*. Additionally, "Healer" shimmers and shines majestically which is reminiscent of the synthetic threads that were introduced by European contact.¹³ The preciousness of "Healer" also suggests *kente*. Before the introduction of synthetic materials, the labor-intensive processes and costly materials used to make *kente* were too expensive for most citizens to buy and therefore only the most elite members of society

¹²Dictionary.com Unabridged, "Rhapsody," Dictionary.com, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/rhapsody>.

¹³ Kojo Fosu. *Traditional Art of Ghana*, (Kumasi: Dela Publications and Design Services, 1994), 41.

would wear it.¹⁴ Indeed, for many years the wearing of *kente* was restricted to royalty. (Figure 8) As a result *kente* became a symbol. As mechanical productions and synthetic fibers were introduced *kente* cloths became cheaper and more accessible though it still holds prestige in the eyes of many southern Ghanaians. Anatsui references this change through the materials he uses; he seemingly worthless material like discarded liquor bottle caps and labels to create a piece of art that his valuable. Anatsui's work is similarly expensive; "Healer" recently sold for 349,250 British pounds (\$538,927.68).¹⁵

More importantly, the liquor caps and labels that comprise "Healer" allow Anatsui to discuss the importance of European contact to the peoples of Ghana. Anatsui primarily uses liquor bottle labels and caps that he finds in Nigeria, where he has lived in since 1975, as seen in Figure 7.¹⁶ Although the labels and caps are found in Nigeria, in "Healer" Anatsui uses liquor brands such as "Ebeano," a brand that takes its name from a popular Ghanaian electioneering slogan.¹⁷ This further establishes the link between Anatsui's personal history and the histories of Ghana.

Lisa Binder suggests that Anatsui uses bottle caps and tops to make a statement about the environment.¹⁸ While Anatsui may be an environmentalist I believe this theory neglects the significance of these materials to another social context.¹⁹ The use of liquor bottles and caps allows Anatsui to discuss the impact of European contact on the peoples of Ghana because liquor bottles and caps are associated with the slave trade (in Which Nigeria

¹⁴ Fosu. *Traditional Art of Ghana*, 41.

¹⁵ *Sotheby's Auctions*, "Contemporary Art Evening Auction: Lot 10" Sotheby's, http://www.sothebys.com/app/live/lot/LotDetail.jsp?lot_id=159500849.

¹⁶ Savage, "Contexts Textiles and Gin" 7.

¹⁷ Savage, "Contexts in Textiles and Gin" in Anatsui, *El Anatsui 2006*, 7.

¹⁸ Lisa M. Binder, "El Anatsui," *African Arts* 41 (2008): 24-37.

¹⁹ Peffer, John, "Calling Home," *African Arts* 42, 2 (Summer 2009 2009):

was also greatly affected²⁰). By exclusively using liquor bottle tops Anatsui hints at the first contact between Europe and Ghana. Kings and other leaders of the communities traded liquor for slaves.²¹ Since Anatsui exclusively uses bottle caps and tops—materials that are heavily loaded with this historical meaning—to create his pieces it is unlikely that he is solely making a statement about the environment.

By weaving together these specific materials to create a *kente* he deepens the connection of “Healer” to the slave trade. In 1469 Europeans traded textiles for gold. They soon began trading textiles for slaves. By 1680 a slave could be bought for three to four measures of cloth.²² (Figure 9) Through his sculpture, Anatsui reminds the audience that the slave trade and subsequent colonization still affect Ghanaians. Indeed, recently there has been a push in Ghana to memorialize the slave trade. Cape Coast Castle, one of many slave castles and trading posts, has been open to tourism since Anatsui began working in 1974.²³ It is possible that this push to remember the slave trade influence Anatsui and by putting a reminder of the impact of the slave trade on a piece resembling *kente*, Anatsui demonstrates its on-going relevance. Anatsui also draws on the more general communicative power of history in this reference. *Kente* cloths communicate values, proverbs, and historical events. For example, For example, Figure 4 is called *Tikoro nko agyina*, which means “one head does not constitute a council.” Each cloth has a relationship to the wearer, event, and context in which it is worn, which makes them highly specialized and tailored to the community they

²⁰ Space does not allow me to engage more fully with the various meanings that Nigerian associations bring to this piece but I am aware of them. For more information Gerard Houghton in *El Anatsui and the Transvanguard* provides a discussion of this.

²¹ Lisa M. Binder, “El Anatsui,” *African Arts* 41 (2008): 24-37.

²² Savage, “Contexts Textiles and Gin” 7.

²³ Cape Coast Castle, “Welcome to the Cape Coast Castle Museum,” Cape Coast Castle Museum, <http://www.capecoastcastlemuseum.com/1.html>.

are speaking to.²⁴ In the same way that cloths are named, Anatsui names stitches while creating his pieces to communicate more easily with his assistants. Like *kente* Anatsui's piece has a specific meaning.

The title "Healer" is also significant. Perhaps "Healer" refers to the belief that alcohol can cure (and cause) some ailments such as headaches. More likely, "Healer" references the power of alcohol ironically. The introduction of mass quantities of spirits to African communities had a detrimental effect. Although Ghanaians had liquor before European contact, the amount of alcohol they had access to increased vastly with the advent of European trade. As I mentioned previously, political leaders wanted alcohol to provide to their constituents, they traded slaves of their communities and in some cases members of their own communities to obtain alcohol.²⁵ This liquor trade fueled the continuation of slavery.

The title "Healer" also indicates that the piece is an important personal step for Anatsui. "Healer" can also be seen enabling Anatsui to discuss issues that he had to deal with growing up in Ghana. It is likely that since Ghana gained independence in 1957 Anatsui grew up with the effects of colonialism and then the turmoil that ensued after independence. The change to a post-colonial nation was not a smooth transition; for example, within a decade of independence, the government was overthrown (1966). Whether or not this had an immediate impact on Anatsui he was aware of and had lived through these major transitions. I suggest that through this piece Anatsui heals from this tumultuous history.

²⁴Ibid., 38.

²⁵ Lisa A. Lindsay, *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall), 54-77.

“Healer” also shows the importance of community to Anatsui. As I learned when I was in Ghana, the practice of making strip-woven *kente* is often taught to children in communities where *kente* cloths are made. Anatsui often brings people in from the community to assist in making his pieces and creates a sense of community. Creating community may be important to Anatsui because he feels it is authentic or because he feels it is important to teach, which he has done at universities in Nigeria since 1975.²⁶ But, more generally, it is important that he creates this community because communities and the sense that one belongs is important to the healing process. Sharing experiences with people who have been through events you have experienced is often a means of healing from traumatic events or feeling displaced, an experience that living away from home often generates.

“Movement No. 39”

Kwesi Owusu-Ankomah is another Ghanaian artist who, like Anatsui, lives away from home, and yet draws extensively on the arts of Ghana in his work. In “Movement No. 39” (Figure 3) Owusu-Ankomah²⁷ uses *adinkra* symbols, Fante Asafo flags, and the representations of figures to discuss the importance of global cultural exchange, diaspora, strength, and Ghana to his artistic identity. “Movement No. 39” is part of a larger series entitled “Movement”. Although it is part of a series this piece is specifically relevant to the ideas of identity, history and cultural exchange that I discuss in this thesis.

Owusu-Ankomah visually references *adinkra* in “Movement No. 39.” (2002 Figure 3) The predominance of *adinkra* symbols over the others in this painting shows the importance of Ghana to Owusu-Ankomah's understanding of his own artistic identity. Shannon

²⁶Ottenberg. *New Traditions from Nigeria*, 157.

²⁷ Owusu-Ankomah's ethnicity was not available to the public or from his gallery representative.

Fitzgerald interpreted the “Movement” series, including “Movement No. 39,” as illustrating Owusu-Ankomah’s exploration of transformation, transition, race, and spirituality.²⁸ While this interpretation is interesting I offer an expanded perspective, in which “Movement No. 39” explores global cultural exchange, diaspora, values, and Ghana. I do this by engaging the specifics of this painting, something that Fitzgerald does not do.

The painting is acrylic on canvas and is composed of a stark white background with black symbols arranged in a grid. Four translucent figures in different poses move about the grid. The grid has nine columns and seven rows, although the first and last columns are cut off by the edges of the canvas. This creates the illusion that the space of the painting extends beyond the boundaries of the canvas. The grid-like pattern and symbols of Owusu-Ankomah’s “Movement no. 39” reference a Ghanaian *adinkra*. *Adinkra* cloths (Figure 10) are stamped textiles commonly worn in southern Ghana in the context of mourning.²⁹ These cloths are stamped with symbols which have widely understood meanings and are associated with proverbs.³⁰ The white background and symbols reflect the composition of an *adinkra* cloth.(Figure 10). The thick black paint references the process in which *adinkra* cloths are made. They cloths are stamped with dye made from bark. It is important that the dye's consistency is thick enough to resist soaking through the fabric; this enables the stamp's image to be applied crisply (Figure 11).³¹ Owusu-Ankomah appropriates the aesthetics of an *adinkra* in his paintings; the black paint sits clearly on top of the white backgrounds of his canvases. It is unlikely that Owusu-Ankomah's works accidentally mimic *adinkra*. Since

²⁸ Fitzgerald, “A Fiction of Authenticity”, 33.

²⁹ Cole, *A History of Art in Africa*, 208.

³⁰ Cole, *A History of Art in Africa*, 208.

³¹ Mato, “Clothed in Symbol”, 129

cloths that are printed with *adinkra* symbols are prevalent in southern Ghana it is likely he saw them growing up and was familiar with their use.

The symbols Owusu-Ankomah uses in “Movement No. 39” show the importance of global cultural exchange to his artistic identity. One of the symbols that appears in the painting, sankofa, is repeated numerous times. Sankofa (Figure 12) is an *adinkra* symbol which means “go back and take.”³² It has been adopted by Ghanaians and many African-Americans to mean “discover your history.” By appropriating the Sankofa symbol in his work Owusu-Ankomah references the importance of discovering one’s cultural heritage in forming one’s identity; he may even suggest the importance of rediscovering Ghana artistic heritage in discovering his own artistic identity.

Owusu-Ankomah also employs symbols from many different places all over the world including Bremen, Germany, his current home, in his work.³³ Street signs from Germany appear in this and other paintings (Figure 13). Owusu-Ankomah also uses signs from all over the world, including Saharan rock symbols. Some of the other symbols include a circle with the number “60” in the middle, a circle containing seven dots (6 dots arranged in a circle with one dot in the center), and what appears to be an upside down “U” bisected by lines. Some of the symbols repeat, but most are unique. The repetition of certain symbols suggests the importance to their meanings as it can be assumed that the repeated symbols are particularly important to the message of “Movement no. 39.” These symbols may appear to be unrelated but they are connected to the same values. A road sign is a symbol of a law.

³² National Commission on Culture, “*Adinkra*: Cultural Symbols of the Asante People,” National Commission on Culture Website, <http://www.ghanaculture.gov.gh/privatecontent/File/Adinkra%20Cultural%20Symbols%20of%20the%20Asante%20People.pdf>.

³³ Shannon Fitzgerald, “A Fiction of Authenticity”, 33.

Many of the symbols Owusu-Ankomah uses represent laws. Other symbols in his paintings represent strength, courage, wisdom, and justice.³⁴ Although many people might expect that Owusu-Ankomah's pieces contain *adinkra* symbols only because they resemble *adinkra* cloth, it is not the only reason. Instead, his art uses many *adinkra* symbols intertwined with symbols from cultures all over the world that represent the same values.

By juxtaposing symbols from different cultures he reveals the power that communication possesses, a power that is often overlooked in everyday life. The juxtaposed symbols also suggest that Ghana is among the several countries and cultures that have influenced his artistic identity. It is also evident that Owusu-Ankomah's cultural exchange is important to him because of his biography. Owusu-Ankomah lists his trip to Europe in 1979 in his biography.³⁵ I assume his first contact with European artists and galleries was as formative an experience as his education in Ghana because they are provided equal space in his biography. Nevertheless associations with Ghana remain a major animating force in this painting.

Many of the symbols Owusu-Ankomah paints represent strength, courage, wisdom, and justice.³⁶ Bese Saka is a symbol of affluence, power, plenty, togetherness, and unity (Figure 14).³⁷ In the context of this painting, I chose to interpret this as a symbol of Ghana's affluence, power, plenty, togetherness, and unity because it originated in Ghana and can easily be understood by Ghanaian audiences. These are also values seen in Fante Asafo flags

³⁴ Ibid, 34.

³⁵ Britto, Fitzgerald, and Mosaka, *A Fiction of Authenticity*, 142.

³⁶ Ibid, 34.

³⁷ National Commission on Culture, "Adinkra: Cultural Symbols of the Asante People," National Commission on Culture Website,

<http://www.ghanaculture.gov.gh/privatecontent/File/Adinkra%20Cultural%20Symbols%20of%20the%20Asante%20People.pdf>.

(Figure), which I believe Owusu-Ankomah drew inspiration from. Asafo Companies are paramilitary associations of the Fante peoples of Ghana. While Asafo companies once provided military protection, they now perform social functions.³⁸ Flags are used to identify and present the superior values of companies during competitive social functions. Asafo flags (Figure 15) identify a specific company and communicate messages of strength, superiority, and bravery through imagery and allusions to proverbs. All Asafo companies have rights to certain colors, motifs, designs, and instruments which are usually present on their flags and show superior strength and bravery.³⁹ I believe that Owusu-Ankomah drew on these textiles because they are visual representations of values he esteems. Asafo flags also offer a model for presenting symbols from multiple cultures together. As seen in figure fifteen most Asafo flags made before 1957, the date of Ghana's independence from Great Britain, use an image of the British flag in their upper left corner; most flags after 1957 use the Ghanaian flag.⁴⁰ Some Asafo flags also show a European influence and have a caravel or other European sailing ship represented. These figures appear alongside Ghanaian symbols or mythical creatures. Both Fante Asafo flags and Owusu-Ankomah mix cultural symbols in their art to express messages about identity and position within society. While for Asafo flags that society is a local one, for Owusu-Ankomah, as a member of the African diaspora, it is a more global one.

The importance of diaspora to Owusu-Ankomah is shown through the figures in "Movement No. 39." The four people in the painting are presumably men. They lack hair and breasts and have wide torsos with muscular arms. They are only partially visible due to the

³⁸K. Edusei, "Fante Asafo Shrines and Flags" (lecture, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology,) Kumasi, Ghana, June 3, 2009

³⁹Herbert M. Cole. "Arts of Fante Military Companies," 223.

⁴⁰ John Gillow, *African Textiles* (San Fransisco: Chronicle Books, 2003), 95.

large size of the symbols that surround and comprise them, and the relatively small size of the people. The symbols in the figures differ from the background symbol grid; the two sets of symbols appear to be mismatched in places which helps to reveal the figures' boundaries. In some cases the background symbol is so similar to the one contained in the figures that they appear to be combined as a new symbol; this hints at the blending of identities one might experience in a diasporic context.

The figures in the painting have been interpreted as a large man encompassing certain values such as self-determination, wisdom, and hope. They elicit awe. Fitzgerald interprets the men as transcending time and both racial and culture divides.⁴¹ However, I argue the men in this painting can be seen as Ghanaians living in the Diaspora. The men are translucent and the symbols that distinguish and delineate their bodies are what separate, differentiate, and define them and symbols from many countries comprise their identities. Yet the men are all at least partially comprised of *adinkra* symbols. These symbols represent the largest part of their identities. Additionally, the other symbols that compose the figures reveal their personal values and associations with other cultures. While Ghanaian culture makes up part of their identity they are also influenced and made up of parts of many other cultures. They are able to move in and out of symbols and therefore cultures, yet it would be hard for them to be place anywhere within the painting and not be at least partially composed of *adinkra* symbols. These figures are like Owusu-Ankomah in that their identities may change with the places they live or come in contact with but some element of Ghana always remains important.

Comparison and Conclusions

⁴¹Fitzgerald, "A Fiction of Authenticity", 34.

Anatsui and Owusu-Ankomah have much in common besides Ghanaian nationality. Both artists chose to use historically important textiles to talk from Ghana about contemporary ideas of identity and living in the diaspora. I think this is telling not only of how important textiles are to some Ghanaian cultures, such as the Asante, but the role that they have played in communication and establishing identities within these cultures and beyond. Additionally, both Owusu-Ankomah and Anatsui referenced the ability of textiles to communicate, Anatsui referenced the ability of *kente* cloth to communicate values, ideas, and aspects historical events. Anatsui references this ability to communicate as well as materials and composition to explore Ghana's specific history with the slave trade (in "Kente Rhapsody") and to discuss a larger history of the slave trade (in "Healer"). Owusu-Ankomah uses *adinkra* and Asafo flags to communicate values that are important to him as well as reference the importance of Ghana to his artistic identity.

One interesting aspect that is found in both of their works is the choice of medium. The mediums explored by the artists allow them to discuss topics important to them. The medium is more significant of a choice in the case of Anatsui. He specifically chose materials that had ties with the places he is working. Owusu-Ankomah on the other hand uses acrylic on canvas. Neither of them employs the medium traditionally associated with the types of textiles they are engaging. That is not to say that materials used in *kente* or even *adinkra* are stagnant, indeed they change very much with technology and interactions between peoples. However, neither artist chose to go back and work in textiles themselves. In Anatsui's case he chose to work in bottle caps and labels rather than thread and in Owusu-Ankomah's case he chose to work in acrylic paint rather than dye from bark. I suggest these media were employed because they enable the artists to discuss issues that are difficult to incorporate into

textiles and at the same time, includes a bit of their current surroundings. In Anatsui's case, it was not as if thread was not available in Nigeria, it is that the bottle caps are abundant, had a clear association with the place they were from, and are pregnant with historical meaning. These bottle caps also allow him to discuss a topic, like slavery, subtly rather than overtly. Through his use of materials, Anatsui gently reminds the audience that the slave trade and its impact on societies are still affecting people in the world and it is not just a distant history. In Owusu-Ankomah's it is possible that he chose acrylic paints because of their versatility. Acrylic paints allow Owusu-Ankomah a bit more freedom to include figures and multicultural symbols that cloth may have not allowed him to. Additionally, it allowed Owusu-Ankomah's work to be considered fine art rather than craft, as textiles often are often considered. This access to the fine arts world allowed him to have a broader audience than textiles may have. Paintings allowed Owusu-Ankomah the freedom to show his work in a gallery or museum; textiles are shown in these spaces yet not as often.

In addition to visually referencing Ghanaian textiles and their ability to communicate, both artists chose to go back and explore their roots or the roots of the place they are from. Although Anatsui was not exposed to Ewe culture as a child, he still chose to engage with Ghanaian textiles, an important element of Ewe culture. Owusu-Ankomah also chose to return to his roots and explore what that means in terms of his identity.

Although they share similarities, Owusu-Ankomah and Anatsui have major differences in the themes of their artwork. Owusu-Ankomah explores conditions of cultural exchange and diaspora through his artwork. His artwork creates a visual language that everyone from one of the cultures referenced can take something from but *adinkra* symbols are predominant and representative of his time in Ghana and his Ghanaian heritage. In this

way his work focuses much more on diaspora than the work of Anatsui whose work generally deals with Ghanaian history and European contact, even though Anatsui is also a diasporic artist.

Anatsui's explores conditions of history and slavery in Ghana in his artwork. Unlike Owusu-Ankomah, whose work centers on a more peaceful, equitable and cooperative cultural exchange, Anatsui engages with violence and history and the negative aspects of European and Ghanaian contact. These different views of cultural exchange seem are present in the larger body of work of Anatsui and Owusu-Ankomah's work.

In my opinion, El Anatsui and Owusu-Ankomah express these ideas of history and slavery, diaspora and global cultural exchange, because of where they are personally as well as because of increasing globalization. El Anatsui chose to draw from Asante and Ewe artistic practices to discuss the history of the slave trade. El Anatsui may have personally chosen to do this because of his time in the diaspora, though as I also argued it is also because of the socio-political conditions of Ghana during the time that he resided there. Eli Salahi put this experience of home from afar best when he said "the locality of one's own home becomes almost a past dream, very very dear. You have a longing for it, nostalgia as if it were something from a distant past"⁴² I believe Owusu-Ankomah created his work about diaspora and global exchange because it is a common experience many people, Africans included, are going through and can relate to. The contemporary movement of Africans is really the fifth stream of people leaving African in the past 100,000 years meaning that this is a very old experience he is exploring and commenting on⁴³. However, the new millennium was the

⁴²Eli Salahi, quoted in Sidney Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 191.

⁴³Colin Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *The Journal of Negro History* 85 (2000) 28.

perfect time for Owusu-Ankomah to discuss these experiences because of technology which brings the world closer together. Additionally, this present state of globalization, where home is never very far away, allows both artists Anatsui and Owusu-Ankomah to stay connected to their homes. Peffer's theory that living in the diaspora can give artists the perspective to speak to a broader audience could also be applied to Anatsui and Owusu-Ankomah. Perhaps the time abroad gave Anatsui and Owusu-Ankomah the distance (made closer through globalization) and the tools to speak to a broad audience.⁴⁴ In other words Anatsui and Owusu-Ankomah are fluent in many different cultures and practices because of their time abroad and can create artwork that speaks to a diverse audience. Through their experiences around the world they have the understanding of different cultures and the ability to effectively communicate ideas that transcend traditional boundaries and are aided by globalization. And yet, as I have been arguing, they are never far from home and their references to the textile traditions of Ghana in their artwork clearly demonstrates this.

⁴⁴ John Peffer, "Calling Home," *African Arts* 422 (2009); 8.

Images:



Figure 1
El Anatsui, "Kente Rhapsody"
Kente Rhapsody (image).*The Artkey*. Available from
http://www.theartkey.com/index.php?page=news_id&id=116



Figure 2
"Healer" by El Anatsui
Anatsui, El. *El Anatsui 2006*. Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, c2006. 13



Figure 3

Movement no. 39, Owusu-Ankomah, Owusu-Ankomah's *Movement no. 39* is a rectangular acrylic painting measuring 74.8 in x 98.5.

Simon, Njami, and Lucy Duran. *Africa Remix : Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz ;, 2005. 137



Figure 4.

This is an Ewe *kente*. The pattern means “One Head does not Constitute a Council”. “*Wrapped In Pride.*” *Exhibitions*. National Museum of African Art. n.d. <http://http://www.nmfa.si.edu/exhibits/kente/top.htm> (accessed Jan. 22, 2010)

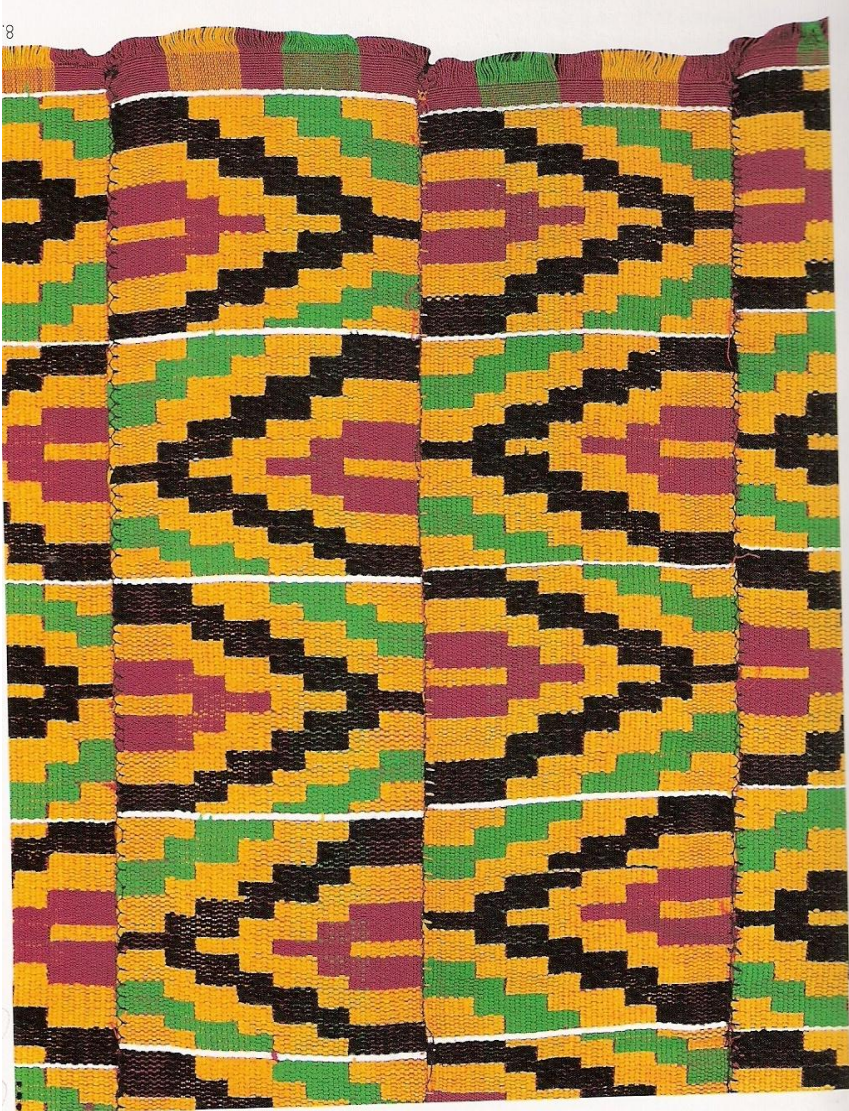


Figure 5

This is an image of a strip-woven *kente*. Upon close inspection the stitches and binding are visible.

Ross, Doran H., and Agbenyega Adedze. *Wrapped in Pride : Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, c1998.21.



Figure 6

Although this is a Ugandan example I used it because it was difficult to find an image of Ghanaian bark cloth.

Gillow, John. *African Textiles*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003. 172.



Figure 7.
Detail from El Anatsui's "Healer", this is to show how the pieces are flattened and joined by wire.
Anatsui, El. *El Anatsui 2006*. Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, c2006.



Figure 8..

This is Paramount chief Nana Akyanfu Akowuah Dateh II. He is shown here wearing a *kente* cloth.

Ross, Doran H., and Agbenyega Adedze. *Wrapped in Pride : Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, c1998.2

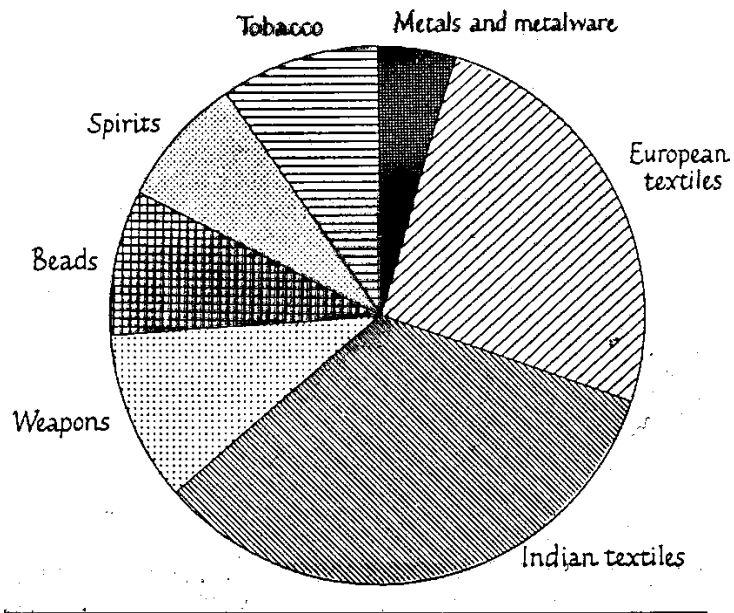


Figure 9.
Chart showing what slaves were traded for, they were overwhelmingly traded for textiles.
Lindsay, Lisa A. *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

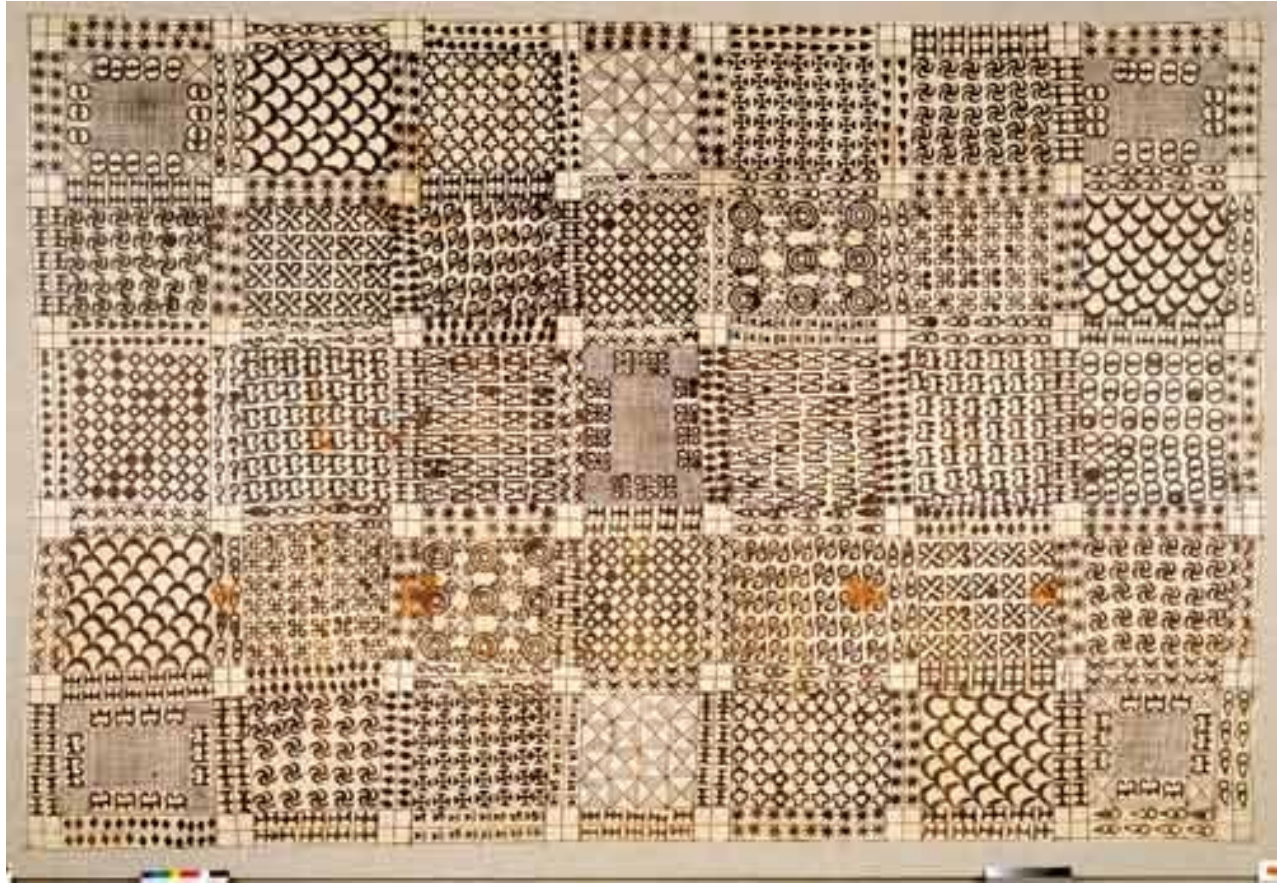


Figure 10.

Adinkra cloth from Ghana. Each symbol creates a sort of pattern within the section it is stamped.

19th Century *Adinkra* Wrapper, Asante Peoples.” *Inscribing Meaning*. National Museum of African Art. 09 May 2007. <http://www.nmfa.si.edu/exhibits/inscribing/power.html> (accessed Jan. 09, 2010).



Figure 11

Dye used to stamp the cloth with. It is very thick so it will sit on top of the fabric instead of be absorbed into it.

Ringle, Hallie. Untitled (image). 2009.



Figure 12

Sankofa, meaning “go back and take” also occasionally comes in the form of a bird Simon, Njami, and Lucy Duran. *Africa Remix : Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz ;, 2005. 137



Figure 13.

This is an image of a street sign, probably a speed limit sign.

Simon, Njami, and Lucy Duran. *Africa Remix : Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz ;, 2005. 137



Figure14

Bese Saka meaning “sack of cola nuts”, symbol of affluence, power, plenty, togetherness, unity.

Simon, Njami, and Lucy Duran. *Africa Remix : Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz ;, 2005. 137



Figure 15

This is an image of a Fante-Asafo flag.

Clarke, Duncan. "Fante Asafo Flag." *Introduction to Fante Asafo Flags*. Adire African Textiles. 09 June 08. <http://www.adireafricantextiles.com/asafointroduction.htm> (accessed Jan. 24, 2010).

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