

## **Kente Cloth Background Information**

Kente ("ken tuh" or "ken tee") cloth is a brightly colored fabric of the Akan peoples from Ghana in West Africa. It is hand woven on wooden looms, traditionally by men. Highly esteemed and carefully crafted, the cloth was originally reserved for royalty; in modern times, it is widely used.

Weaving in Africa has ancient roots but Kente cloth weaving is relatively modern. According to legend, it was born when two friends observed Anansi the spider spinning a web. They imitated his actions to create a beautiful cloth, which was taken to the chief. He liked it so much that he declared it the royal fabric and wore it on special occasions. The Kente cloth as we know it today with its bold colors and striking patterns was developed by the Ashanti (one of the Akan groups) in the 17th century Other nearby Akan peoples weave Kente cloth as well, with varying colors and patterns typical of each group.

The yarns used over time in the making of Kente have been of various types. In the past, locally grown cotton was spun into yarn, and sometimes yarn was obtained by unraveling cotton and silk cloths imported from Europe. Today, most of the yarns are produced by factories.

Kente cloth is woven on a loom in four inch strips of varying lengths. Strips are then laid carefully side by side and hand-sewn together to create panels of cloth, which are usually used for clothing. Wearing Kente wrapped and draped around the body, a piece of men's clothing typically needs 24 strips, and a women's, 14.

Kente is more than just a cloth; the colors and patterns are imbued with symbolic meaning. There are over 300 identified pattern symbols, representing moral values, philosophical ideas, historical events, proverbs, individual achievements, attributes of animal life, and so on. Thread colors are chosen by the weavers to enhance the design and to convey meaning; the list below describes what various colors represent.

**Yellow (and Gold)** – royalty, prosperity, wealth (from egg yolk and the mineral gold)

**Red** – death, funerals, sacrifice, struggle (associated with blood)

**Pink** – femininity (associated with females)

**Maroon -** Mother Earth, healing (from the color of earth)

**Purple** – similar to maroon and pink (a feminine color associated with healing)

**Blue** – peace, harmony, love (associated with the sky)

Green - growth, vitality, crops, spiritual renewal (associated with plants and herbs)

**Black** – maturity, spiritual energy, rites of death (things darken as they mature)

**Grey** - healing rituals, cleansing rituals (associated with ash)

**Silver -** peace, purity, joy (associated with the moon)

White - purity, balance, ancestral spirits (used in festivals)

For a pre-K-2nd grade lesson using Kente Cloth, please see Bold and Beautiful.