

Kente cloth celebrated, explained

Contributed by CYNTHIA ROBY

DAVIE — The origin of the weaving of Kente cloth is explained with both a legend and historical accounts.

Legend has it that two Ashanti hunters learned the art of weaving by observing a spider weaving its web. Imitating the spider's work, they wove a strip of raffia fabric, and later improved upon their skill.

The fabric was the focus of a celebration and African cloth-making program on May 8 at Nova Southeastern University.

Americans wear Kente cloth as a sign of African pride, said Ghanaian Kente weaver Gabriel Ahimah. In Africa, cloths bearing specific patterns are worn to represent different occasions, including marriage, death, royalty, wealth and child-naming ceremonies.

"It's a big business in Ghana," Ahimah said.

In the fashion show closing the event, Ahimah's designs, representing the Kente cloth's various patterns and styles of wear, were modeled.

Kente originated in Ghana, said Dr. Cyril Blavo, a speaker at the celebration.

"However, the people of Bonwire, Kpetoe and the Moshe tribe all claim to have originated its weaving," he said.

Bonwire is now the leading Kente weaving center in Ashanti.

The program, sponsored by NSU's Student National Medical Association, was an effort to expose both students and the community at large to different cultures, said Delali Blavo, the program's coordinator and a second-year medical student.

"In Ghana, Kente is the national cloth and has many uses," said Blavo, who specializes in tropical medicine. "Men drape the cloth as a wrap; women wear it as a kabba slit, or top and long skirt."

Based on the color and design, Blavo added, the cloth is given a name by its weaver.

"It is woven to design a creative pattern and carry a specific message," Blavo said.

The celebration opened with a short film on Ghana and the traditional royal procession of local elders.

“We invite local elders to all celebrations,” Blavo said. “They must oversee what is happening and approve.”

The art of cloth weaving, demonstrated by Ahimah, was performed on a narrow, horizontal loom constructed by Blavo.

One strip of Kente, based on its color and pattern, can take from four to eight hours to weave, Ahimah explained. The strips are then woven together to make a cloth.

“But it can take months if it is for a prominent chief,” Blavo added.

The colors within the pattern convey certain meanings: yellow is for royalty; red is for sacrifice; blue is for peace and harmony; green is for growth, abundance and fertility.

Ahimah, who now lives in Tamarac, began weaving in Ghana at age 10.

“It was within my community that I first saw weavers,” Ahimah said. “Once a big brother would get off the loom, you just got on and tried your best.”

Ahimah, now 32, said it took him “about six or seven years to become an expert. The amount of time is based on how good you are; your talent. Many in the West are interested not only in the process of weaving, but also in the cloth and its intricate design.”

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