

# Exploring knowledge creation within the culturally situated world of Ghana's Kente community

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## Introduction and background

This paper details how Kente-related knowledge is created and shared within a Kente-weaving village named Bonwire, the home of the Ashanti Kente cloth in Ghana. Kente is a knowledge-intensive cultural heritage artefact, which has symbolic, ceremonial, ethnic, and political meaning wherein colours and patterns are used as a visual language to signify information about the wearer. It is now popular as attire in Ghana, in Africa at large, and in the African diaspora worldwide. Traditionally, the skills and knowledge needed were passed on within families only, but there is no study of how this culturally-situated knowledge community is adapting to the increasing commercial demands of this once exclusive cloth that could only be worn by royalty. Although knowledge-related topics have been widely studied, there is no consensus on the concept of knowledge. Some scholars have conceptualised knowledge as an object or as possession (Cook and Brown, 1999). In this perspective knowledge is perceived as objective, that is, "socially-agreed knowing" (Manidis, 2013). Many organisational studies, which are generally based on the positivist paradigm, have embraced this perspective of knowledge. However, there has been difficulty in comprehending knowledge as an object even in organisational analysis (Gherardi, 2009). On the contrary, many social scientists have adopted a practice-based approach in conceptualising knowledge. Silvia Gherardi for example used a practice-based approach, which offered a contrasting view to the object-based approach to knowledge. Gherardi writes that; "knowledge should be defined as an activity, as a collective and distributed "doing", (Gherardi, 2009, p.353). According to the practice-based approach, "knowledge is not an object captured by means of mental schemes: rather it is a practical and collective activity, and it is acquired not only through thought, but also through the body and sensory and aesthetic knowledge" (Strati 2007 in Gherardi 2009, p. 354). Knowledge is an activity shared between humans and non-humans. Knowledge is embodied in objects, artefacts and tools; they anchor practices in their materiality; they interrogate humans and are extensions of their memory (Gherardi, 2009). This perspective raises the question then, of how knowledge is created within a community.

The extant literature has provided some views on what knowledge creation is. Scharmer (2001) for example, defined knowledge creation as "an intensely human, messy process of imagination, invention and learning from mistakes, embedded in a web of human relationships"(Scharmer, 2001 p. 247). Knowledge creation involves and requires interactions and synergetic relationships among people (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Jakubik, 2008). People have different skills, perspectives, and opinions and thus their interactions can result in the creation of new knowledge (Hackman, 2004). As Wei Choo asserted, "knowledge creation is achieved through a recognition of the synergistic relationship between tacit and explicit knowledge...through the design of social processes that create new knowledge by converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge" (Choo 1996, p.334). In a traditional society such as Bonwire, where Kente weaving is both a sacred tradition and a valuable profession, how does this knowledge creation occur, and how is new knowledge created? Thus, the objective of this study is to understand how Kente-related knowledge is created.

## Context of the study

Kente is a hand-woven traditional cloth popular among Ghanaians and some Africans in the diaspora. Kente weaving involves interlacing a set of warps across each other vertically and horizontally. This process results in a pattern. These patterns are intentionally created by the weavers to communicate a particular message; there are moral, political, social and religious philosophies behind these patterns (Boateng 2015). Kente weaving and other activities surrounding it have evolved over the years. The initial ones were made with black and white threads made from raffia tree; however, as time went by, the weavers started using dyes made from bark of trees, roots, herbs, etc. to dye the threads to produce different colours and patterns. The emergence of the new colours and patterns imply the creation of new Kente-related knowledge. This study thus, seeks to understand how Kente-related knowledge is created.

## Literature review and conceptual framework

To address our research objective, we employed the Community of Practice (CoP) theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991). CoPs has been defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002, p. 4). Similarly, a community of practice is also defined as “a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice”(Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98). A community of practice does not necessarily mean an identifiable group or co-presence of participants; members can live miles apart and might not know each other personally (Nicolini, 2012).

Wenger (2004) identified three basic features of CoP: domain, community and practice. The practices around the creation and flow of knowledge, and the experiences and expertise within a domain are all part of building a community of practice (Wenger, 2004; Wenger 2000; Lave and Wenger, 1991).

**Methodology and context:** In this study the object of interest is the community around Kente. Kente brings weavers, sellers, tailors, fashion designers and consumers together to form a community. These people have different experiences, knowledge, expertise and interest, and we studied how knowledge is created and nurtured within this community.

In order to achieve this, we employed qualitative interviews as the research design. The participants were individuals who have different roles in Kente production, selling and usage. All these participants had some expertise and knowledge about Kente. Semi-structured interviews with all entities in the Kente weaving chain from weavers to consumers were used to gather data; a total of fourteen (14) one-on-one interviews were conducted over a period of two months. A thematic analysis technique was used to analyse the data.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that although knowledge about Kente production and selling has evolved over the years, new knowledge is continually being created. Also, the new knowledge is often an improvement upon existing knowledge. For example the new patterns of Kente, with new meanings but still within the old rules, have emerged from a combination or an alteration of an existing pattern. In addition, we noted that new Kente-related knowledge is created through interactions among the Kente weavers, sellers, tailors, users and fashion designers, who indeed form a community of practice. Through regular interactions, they exchange ideas among themselves, which results in the creation of new knowledge. We also found that new Kente-related knowledge is created only through the flow of existing Kente-related knowledge. As this cultural heritage knowledge flows among the community, new meanings are created. New knowledge also emerges through individuals’ imaginations as well as through trial and error. In short, the preservation of this living cultural heritage depends not just on propagating existing skills and knowledge in the traditional manner, but also in adapting to new demands, new processes, and new fashions.

**Conclusion:** Knowledge-creation in culturally situated knowledge communities is situated within traditional practices, but in order to survive, this knowledge is interwoven with new knowledge that evolves alongside social processes, activities, people and artefacts from outside this traditional community. Thus, Kente-related knowledge is co-created through the interactions between weavers, sellers, tailors, fashion designers and users.

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