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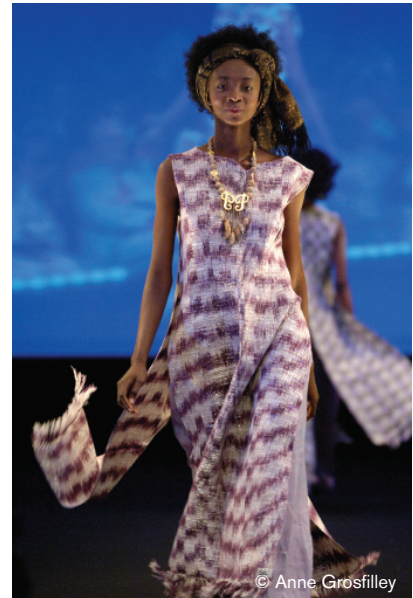
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Con(Texts): Re-Examining the Social Life of Kanga Cloth

The *kanga*, a type of East African textile, is a central part of daily life along the Swahili coast. Lately, the *kanga* market turned this cloth into an internationally-recognized icon of African culture. Its mass production makes it more accessible to poor women, yet there are still negative consequences relating to a certain degree of cultural loss linked to this process.

by Stephanie Birch and Anne Namatsi Lutomia

African textiles are often characterized by vibrant, highly-saturated colors and bold patterns. To the untrained eye, the *kanga* (also called *leso*) of the Swahili coastal region may seem indifferent from machine-dyed cloths found in other parts of the conti-

nent. However, the *kanga* is more than a piece of fabric, it is a space for women to voice “unspeakable” communication and a women-centered repository for indigenous knowledge and feminisms. This cloth features bold designs in varying colors with proverb-like text called *jina*, meaning name. Functioning like bumper stickers or buttons, customers find appropriate-



ly-worded cloths to provide an indirect voice and support them in their personal life, signal their political stance and announce their religious beliefs. This article discusses the social life of the *kanga*, its commodification, and changing function in East African society. The *kanga* textile industry has rapidly expanded over the last two decades, giving rise to new issues around their manufacture, consumption, and influences in daily lives of East African women. As a result of the changes in the manufacturing process, the context of *kanga* usage is shifting away from its communicative functions in recording women's histories and transmitting culturally-subversive messages.

Throughout this article we make use of terms attached to complex histories and meanings. We employ the following terms through the frameworks, definitions, and perspectives described below:

Kanga - For the sake of clarity, we favor the term *kanga* over others words used to describe the same type of textile (such as *leso* and *khanga*). The term *kanga* was used to refer to colorful printed clothes (made by block or mechanical processes) during the era of Indian Ocean slave trade to create social distinction between free and enslaved Africans, who wore plain clothes, called *merikani* and *kaniki* (Fair 1998).

Indigenous & Traditional - There are many definitions and connotations of the term *indigenous*. In discussing indigenous knowledge, we borrow from Chidi Oguamanam's argument in his book, *International Law and Indigenous Knowledge*, in which he applies a broader definition that includes «so-called local communities [and] non-Western cultures» (2006). While we recognize the nuances existing between indigenous and traditional knowledges, we use these terms interchangeably to refer to culturally-coded knowledge produced, shared, and recreated among an identity group as an «aspect of the cultural dynamic of its practitioners» (Oguamanam 2006). Like Oguamanam, we «reject the notion that such knowledge[s] [are] antiquated, static, and inferior to Western [knowledge]» (Oguamanam 2006).



Swahili - The term *Swahili* is used in multiple ways throughout this article. Firstly, *Swahili* (or *Waswahili*) is used to refer to an ethnic identity group formed during the Indian Ocean slave trade and in the post-abolition era. Secondly, this term is again used when referring to the coastal regions of Kenya and Tanzania, including their island regions, specifically Zanzibar. Finally, *Swahili* (or *Kiswahili*) is used in reference to the language of the Swahili people during slave-trade era and its more modern iterations throughout the East African region following the era of independence in the mid-late 20th century.

Jina - The message that a *kanga* carries, printed in uppercase in Swahili and sometimes Sheng (an urban linguistic derivative of English and Swahili) in a rectangle with a white background for readability. Examples of *majina* (plural) are:

Penzi halichagui rangi / Love knows no color
 Kwake nimetulia / In him I have found tranquility
 Mola twashukuru / We praise God
 Mungu ni mwema / God is good
 Subira ina malipo / Patience pays
 Zawadi ya Idd / A gift of Idd



All images: Examples of *kanga* brands. © Gerald Andrew Akolo

Kanga and Its Uses

The *kanga* is distinctly recognizable from other African textiles because of its design. Its basic design structure consists of a patterned border (*pindo*) surrounding a central motif (*mji*) and Swahili proverb or phrase (*jina*), which effectively marks the intended orientation for the cloth to be worn. Typically, *kangas* measure $1\frac{3}{4}$ m x $1\frac{1}{4}$ m and are sold in pairs (*doti*) (Zawawi 2005). While commonly worn as a dress, wrap skirt, or shawl, the *kanga* has unlimited uses, some of which are listed in *Kangas: 101 Uses* (Hanby 1985). This book illustrates the broad versatility of the *kanga*, including three swimsuit styles, multiple methods for tying a skirt or dress, as well as other practical uses, such as a head-pad for carrying heavy loads, a sail, and mosquito net (Hanby 1985). The *kanga* continues to be repurposed and is now used as a fabric to tailor formal and informal clothes for men and women, as well as part of the material for making swimming wear, shoes and earrings, decor etc. In the fashion industry, the East African

fashion week designs made of *kanga* cloth continue to dominate the show. *Kangas* are used in celebrations such as weddings, funerals, birthdays, national days, traditional dances and even in burial ceremonies. Women use *kangas* when working on farms or in the kitchen. Indeed, the tying of the *kanga* when there is a task to be done signals a readiness to work. Women in East Africa exchange *kangas* as gifts, with mothers buying or handing down cloths to their daughters as an intergenerational inheritance. In communities throughout East Africa and other parts of the world, the *kanga* becomes an artifact tying women together. The *kanga* has been an important identity-making tool among East African women during the Indian Ocean slave trade and in the post-abolition era. East African women first began wearing the *kanga* during the 18th century, but it wasn't until the 1870s that the cloth gained its fame among elite Zanzibaris who wanted to separate themselves from the enslaved populations (Linneburgh 1992). When slavery was abolished and former slaves started buying items that indicated their mobility as free entities, the *kanga* became one of these objects (McCurdy 2006). Early *kanga* texts were written in Arabic and later changed into Swahili, printed in the roman script, further contributing to the Swahili identity-in-the-making (Barnes 2005). The incorporation of text transformed the *kanga* from a symbolic expression of identity to a silent, communicative action, by which culturally - and linguistically - coded messages can be shared, received, and interpreted among a community of belongers. In her work about the *kanga* and the co-production of cultures in Africa and the Indian Ocean Region, Ressler traced the diverse contributions to *kanga* design motifs to Persia, Kashmir, Scotland, India, Arabia and Indonesia (2012).

Social and Political Functions

Throughout its history, the *kanga* has been a site for unspoken communication between women for riddling one another (*wanawake kufumbiana*) and conflict resolution (*kanga za kujibizana*). By wearing the *kanga*, women used the body as a site to

construct spaces where they could participate and engage one another in what is considered private and prohibited conversations. The social life of the *kanga* provided East African women with a means for accessing social and political arenas by disrupting patriarchal societal norms of privacy and modest behavior. *Kangas* and the way women use them can be imagined as a form of texting, where you receive a message and respond, or on Facebook, where individuals leave messages to trigger responses. The *kanga* continues to be of value as an item of clothing and display, and as a medium for communicating a range of messages about status, identity, relationships, and other social commentary (McCurdy 2006). Historically, the *jina* or text of the *kanga* has been the most important aspect in its consumption and utility as a result of the proverbial communicative tradition within Swahili society (Beck 2001; 2005). The choice to wear a *kanga* must be intentional and not based solely on the printed pattern or color, because, when wearing this type of cloth, one's emotions, thoughts, or beliefs literally and literarily adorn the body. While women have been central to the consumption and circulation of the *kanga* textiles, they have also been responsible for the composition of popular *kanga* texts that reflect and speak directly to their lived experiences and perspectives. Typically, women would create the sayings and give them to the manufacturers in exchange for a small amount of money or a *kanga* of their choice (McCurdy 2006). However, women's labor in *kanga* production is often unrecognized and uncompensated. As a result of their creative contributions, the *kanga* uniquely serves as an historical record of Swahili women's histories and a marker of their participation in the creation of intergenerational indigenous knowledge and literacy.

Changes to *Kanga* Textiles

With all of its convenience and versatility, it is no surprise that the *kanga* has become more prevalent in East African society than ever before in fashion, tourism, and everyday use. As a result of sweeping manufacturing changes over the last twenty years, *kanga* textiles are cheaper and more broadly accessible throughout the region. The traditional uses of the *kanga* have been repurposed and it is now used for just about anything and by anyone. Acting as an informal social archive, the changes to the production and uses of *kanga* textiles reflect broader changes in East African society and culture, specifically relating to technology, language, and religion. The shift in language is reflected in the introduction of Sheng, a mixture of Swahili and English mostly spoken in urban cities of Kenya.

Christianization of the *Kanga*

While Swahili Muslim women have been documented as the sole writers of the proverbial texts, there is no data indicating how Christian women or organizations participated, even though there is evidence that they do. Whereas *kanga* texts have been specifically authored by Muslim women, a new trend has emerged, leading to a prevalence of Christian religious themes. The Christianization of *kanga* texts is a direct result of changes in the manufacturing practices, while also reflecting and contributing to a rise in Islamophobia and anti-Islamic sentiments throughout East Africa. Unlike in prior times when messages were mostly coined in the form of sayings with less references to God. Now the messages have explicit biblical tones. *Kanga* pur-

chasing is also influenced by the religion of the buyer. *Kangas* with Christian messages are mostly purchased by Christian women, while Muslims buy the *kangas* featuring Islamic messages.

Technology and Language

While *kangas* have been machine printed since the early 20th century (Ong'oa-Morara 2014), the rapid growth of technological innovation during the 21st century has transformed that textile production process and is allowing manufacturers to produce in larger quantities and varieties of colors, patterns, and styles. In fact, technology has become so pervasive throughout the Swahili coast that its influence is sometimes reflected in *kanga* pattern designs and textual messages. The *kanga* is quickly becoming an internationally-recognized icon of East African culture, as a result of its broader accessibility and affordability from the mass production process. Additionally, online and mobile technologies allow East Africans new opportunities in global communication, with the *kanga* appearing in web stores, blogs, various social media platforms, music videos, and more. As a result, African and European couture fashion designers have begun to include the *kanga* as part of a larger appropriation of African and African-inspired prints.

Manufacturing and Production

The liberalization of economy under the structural adjustment program led to the collapse of the textile and clothing industry and the closure of Kenyan manufacturing companies, such as Kikomi and Rivatex (Cormody 1998). Other companies that remain open have recently been purchased or received major investments from foreign corporations, such as Urafiki Textiles Mills Company Limited, now called Tanzania-China Friendship Textiles Company Limited (FTC) (Mwansela, Sichona, Akarro 2011). While FTC's name would suggest that it is a model of successful international commercial cooperation, over 1,000 FTC workers implemented a strike on November 12, 2016 over unethical wages practices (Mjasiri 2016; Koumbia 2016). This new precedent in the African textile industry has created a *platform market* scheme, which disrupts the producer-buyer relationship by interjecting a middleman or *intermediary platform* (Rochet & Tirole 2004). At the expense of local industry, manufacturer use an intermediary platform to outsource labor and use cheaper materials to produce larger quantities or lower quality and more affordable textiles. As previously mentioned, the manufacturing process has been a leading cause in the changes to *kanga* textiles over the last twenty years. Manufacturers and middlemen who operate in Kenya, Tanzania, India, China and Europe continue to be the main beneficiaries of the *kanga* industry (Parkin 2004). While women have historically authored and been responsible for the popularization of the *kanga*, *majina* are now written by manufacturers without input from their consumers. In an effort to appeal to the wide possible audience, manufacturers may plagiarize popular proverbs or rely on very generic statements. This process has not only economically disenfranchised East African women who had previously been compensated for their contributions, it has effectively limited their agency to communicate their own experiences, thoughts, and attitudes through the *kanga*.

Emerging Issues of *Kanga* Industry

Increased manufacturing and consumption of *kanga* textiles has gained international attention, appearing in European and African haute couture designs. While this has expanded the market, the culturally appropriative applications of *kanga* textiles in high fashion has negative consequences. Firstly, designers using the *kanga* textiles are participating in a manufacturing industry that has disenfranchised East African knowledge producers. Secondly, the transmission of the *kanga*'s message from the wearer to the recipient is disrupted when neither are able to read Kiswahili and when the text is completely or partially removed in the construction of the garment. Foreign manufacturers are also directly complicit in the cultural appropriation of the *kanga*. The quality of the *kanga* has been compromised, which has admittedly made the cloth more accessible to women, who previously needed to save for a long time in order to access one. Prices are largely dependent on the fabric type and quality, with a variety of textures to choose from, such as waxed, nylon, polyester and pure cotton. The pure cotton *kanga* is the most expensive and preferred among consumers, ranging from ten dollars per pair to about five dollars. The branding company producing the *kanga* determines the price; some of the brands on the market are Mali ya Abdallah, Mali ya Mohamed, Mali ya Tanzania, Mali ya Baraka, Mali ya Furaha and Mali ya Mtoto, to name a few. Mass-manufacturing has triggered significant changes to the role of the *kanga* in society and broader cultural communicative norms. According to Rose Marie Beck, communication in East African society is proverbial, with many ambiguities, limitations, and a normalcy of politeness (Beck 2001; 2005). Whereas the *kanga* has traditionally been used as a strategy for culturally and politically subversive commentary, the recent production of generic *majina* is de-politicizing the acts of wearing, gifting, or displaying the *kanga*. If a cloth becomes a *kanga* only by virtue of its proverbial message, then clothes with generic messages are not true *kangas* when they do not aid the consumer in challenging or navigating the nuanced the social or political landscapes. Whereas a *kanga* text has been arguably the most important factoring in purchasing, gifting, or wearing a *kanga*, consumers are now equally if not more concerned with fabric quality, color, and design.¹ This signifies a major change in the social function and purpose of the *kanga* that only serves to further limit the agency and creative contributions of women, who have relied on proverbial communication to navigate complex cultural norms. The *kanga* has historically served as a woman-centered community-based archive of indigenous knowledge, however, it no longer serves as an historical record as a result of the mass-manufacturing process controlled by foreign investors and corporations. Rather, today's *kanga* is a mere imitation, lacking the essence, spirit, authenticity, and authority of an original work, or *aura*, as Walter Benjamin described it (Benjamin 2004). As an historical document, the *kanga* reflects the cross-cultural and multi-ethnic exchanges and interactions (Ressler 2012), yet the misappropriation of the *kanga* in the manufacturing process fractures these historical connections. Without women composing texts that reflect and react to their changing societal contexts, East African women's history is being preemptively erased.

Con(testi): riesaminando la vita sociale del *kanga*

Il *kanga*, un tessuto tradizionalmente prodotto nell'Africa orientale, è centrale nella vita di ogni giorno per le donne della costa swahili. Per le donne dell'Africa orientale, indossare questo tipo di tessuto significa non solo scegliere un certo tipo di fantasia o colore, ma anche comunicare un'emozione, un pensiero, un sapere tradizionale agli altri e alle altre donne. Si è constatato un cambiamento nella produzione di questo prodotto tessile tradizionale, che è il risultato di contributi creativi delle donne, spesso non riconosciuti. Ad esempio, le innovazioni portate dalla produzione di massa hanno reso il *kanga* più accessibile, mentre la grande diffusione nel turismo e nella moda modifica il significato che questo indumento riveste nella società dell'Africa orientale. Inoltre, sta cambiando anche il ruolo delle donne nel processo di produzione dei testi, in cui compaiono sempre più temi cristiani.

In questo saggio, viene analizzata la vita sociale del *kanga* attraverso la sua produzione e commercializzazione, nonché il suo ruolo di archivio alternativo e di rottura coi sistemi patriarcali. La pratica ininterrotta di comunicazione tramite il *kanga* fornisce alle donne uno spazio nel quale essere ascoltate, resistere al patriarcato, giocare e risolvere conflitti. Nella richiesta delle donne dell'Africa orientale di riconoscimento e controllo dei loro contributi all'industria manifatturiera, in particolare dei diritti di proprietà intellettuale, il *kanga* è al contempo il luogo e la fonte dell'azione. Esse sono sempre più consapevoli che esso è diventato uno spazio in cui possono dare voce ai loro messaggi "indicibili", sospendendo le norme tradizionali di *privacy* e modestia. Si può dire che chi veste il *kanga* partecipa a ciò che James Scott, nel suo libro *Le armi dei deboli*, chiama: "forme di resistenza quotidiane".

In ultimo, vengono esplorate le caratteristiche del mercato del *kanga* in Africa orientale, considerando le problematiche relative al *copyright*, alla produzione e distribuzione, alla vendita. Le industrie manifatturiere stanno sempre più appaltando a terzi il lavoro e utilizzando tessuti poco costosi, il che rende il *kanga* disponibile ad un'ampia scala di acquirenti, a spese però delle manifatture locali. Il risultato delle piattaforme di *marketing* è che la maggior parte di coloro che compongono i testi dei *kanga* (principalmente donne) sono sconosciuti e non ricompensati per i loro contributi, anche in caso di testi che hanno avuto un grande successo presso i consumatori.

Re-Claiming the *Kanga*

In response to similar capitalist practices around the world, many indigenous groups and cultural communities are fighting to protect the integrity of their indigenous knowledges. The Navajo Nation, Maori, and Maasai are just a few examples of cultural communities embroiled in lengthy battles to gain control of the use and production of culturally-derived goods. These groups have each employed two distinct approaches: legal action in pursuit of intellectual property rights (IPR) and social justice advocacy at the local and international levels. By following in the footsteps of other indigenous populations, East African women have the opportunity to re-assert their position within the *kanga* manufacturing industry. At present, international intellectual property laws have not yet developed far enough to appreciate and navigate the complex history of the *kanga* and its multi-ethnic co-production throughout the East African region. Even if East African women were successful in obtaining IPR, it is unlikely that they would be able to enforce those rights against large foreign corporations. So, while pursuing IPR action is not necessarily feasible or beneficial, East African women economically displaced by the *kanga* manufacturing industry possess the social and economic capital to demand change. Being that the *kanga* cloth tradition is one of cultural subversion, it seamlessly intersects practices of social justice action. Through advocacy, coalition building, and collective action practices, East African women are able to further participate in what James Scott calls «everyday forms of resistance» to oppressive systems (Scott 1985). There are three critical steps in moving forward: raising awareness, gaining support, and taking action.

Raising Awareness - East African women have several opportunities for raising awareness at their disposal. At the local level, individuals and community organizations (formal and informal) can create grassroots campaigns to disseminate information about changes in the *kanga* manufacturing industry, widening cultural misappropriation, and opportunities for collective action.

Gaining Support - Women can bolster their local efforts by collaborating with NGOs and international organizations that advocate for traditional knowledges and ethical fashion initiatives. Such collaborative relationships can drive international awareness campaigns, coordinate solidarity efforts with other groups with similar interests, and facilitate important connections with legal professionals. *Taking Action* - Finally, through awareness and support, East African women can develop social and legal campaigns targeted at specific companies within the *kanga* industry and negotiate changes to end exploitative practices.

Through these processes, East African women can use their collective power to reclaim their position in the manufacturing process and re-appropriate the *kanga* to its previous function as a communicative and archival tool. As African women continue to be rendered invisible in the making of history and culture, the archive is an increasingly important space. There they are able to document their experiences and join the project of building with memory inclusive to the records, histories, and future narratives of those living at the fringe of society. Should East African women seek to

reclaim these cloths, they can also move to include the *kanga* in the national archive as an historical collection of material culture representing the conditions and contexts of women's daily lives, as suggested by Sanya and Lutomia (2015).

Conclusion

Due to the changes to manufacturing processes, *kanga* texts are becoming more iconographic than communicative. As a result of these changes to the communicative aspects of the *kanga*, consumer habits and preferences are shifting when purchasing, wearing, or gifting these clothes away from the transmission of proverbial messages towards a greater consideration for visual aesthetics. The contextual role of the *kanga* in East African society is changing symptomatically as a result of foreign-invested mass production and the pervasive influences of technology. Despite these changes, East African women can capitalize on their collective power to renegotiate their position in the *kanga* industry as producers and consumers of traditional knowledge. In this way, the history of the *kanga* can continue to be a testament of the collective power of women in Africa.

NOTE

1 - This is based on a series of interviews conducted on by Gerald Andrew Akolo with *kanga* buyers and traders at a market in Mumias, Kenya in October 2016.

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