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# UTILISATION OF TRADITIONAL DRESS: THE CASE OF SLIT AND KABA IN GHANA

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## Abstract

The primary influence of dress type worn by individuals in a society is culture. Dress, a material culture, whether traditional or contemporary, is used by individuals and groups to create meaning. *Slit* and *kaba* ensemble is made in traditional fabrics and designs and consists of a tailored blouse (*kaba*), long ankle length skirt (*slit*) and a two-yard rectangular piece of cloth used as a shawl or head tie. This dress, which has a cultural significance is worn by women of most ethnic groups in Ghana for formal and informal occasions and may be used in the establishment of identity, wealth, status, beliefs, age and the moral values of the society. This paper focuses on the uses of traditional dress (*slit* and *kaba*) and the meanings individuals attach to it.

## Introduction and background

The primary influence of dress type worn by individuals in a society is culture. Dress, a material culture, whether traditional or contemporary, is used by individuals and groups to create meaning. The diversity of the meanings of dress shows the important social function it plays in the life of individuals as social beings. Roach and Eicher (1973) were of the view that understanding the meanings of dress requires knowledge of the relationship between the cultural setting and the individual, as dress has meaning only within the society in which it emerges.

The uses and meanings of dress vary among different ethnic groups in West Africa, although there are some similarities. The *slit* (skirt) and *kaba* (blouse), a-three-piece ensemble is considered as an adaptation of the indigenous two piece wrapper that women wore before contact with European traders and colonizers. This dress, which has a cultural significance is worn by women of most ethnic groups in Ghana for formal and informal occasions and may be used in the establishment of identity, wealth, status, beliefs, age and the moral values of the society. The focus of this paper is on the uses of traditional dress *slit* and *kaba* and the meanings attach to it.

The use of the word 'traditional' here is not intended to suggest lack of change; it is used to emphasise the association with local cultures and traditions. *Slit* and *kaba* is made in local traditional fabrics such as the ceremonial hand woven kente, expensive wax prints, inexpensive fancy fabrics, or, hand-dyed batik and tie and dye and also recently made in Nigerian hand-woven Aso-Oke and imported lace fabrics. These fabrics are used with cultural meaning, and have overwhelming significance at the individual, group and social level to define identity, social status and acts as a measure of value (Perani and Wolff, 1999).

Dress is also used to communicate ethnic as well as national identities. According to Salm and Falola (2002) traditional dress in Ghana is used to communicate regional and ethnic identity as well as national ideas. Dogbe (2003) emphasized that the use of *slit* and *kaba* at the group level has become a channel of expressing gender, ethnic, nationalist as well as class affiliations. In Ghana today, the traditional *slit* and *kaba* has become an acceptable way of expressing oneself such that most women attending state functions are often seen wearing this dress.

## Method

For this study three government ministries and three polytechnics were selected from three metropolitan centres- Accra, Kumasi and Takoradi- in Ghana. This sampling procedure has been described as non-probability purposive sampling technique in which the elements of the population are not deliberately given equal opportunity to be included in the sample. The workers in the three Government ministries and the students and staff of the Polytechnics come from different ethnic backgrounds and also consist of different age groups. By selecting the ministries and the Polytechnics as the sampling frames, it was assumed that these women earn incomes large enough to afford slit and kaba, have developed a sense of fashion and interest in dress. Even though the students were still in school, they had allowances from their parents and guardians and also received tertiary education loans which can be used to acquire slit and kaba.

Stratified sampling technique which first divides the population into strata (or sub-groups) was used as the census of Ghana (2002, Ghana Statistical service) already divided the population into various age groups. The sample consisted of 7 strata of age groups of women between the ages of 20-54 who are considered as consumers of the traditional dress slit and kaba. In April 2005, 230 copies of questionnaire, specifically designed for the study with a three and five point Likert scale items were administered to female workers of the three selected ministries and staff and students of the three Polytechnics in Accra, Kumasi and Takoradi. In all 214 questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 93%.

## Discussion of findings

The preliminary results are presented in four main themes as this study is still on-going.

**Table 1: Percentage of Meanings attached to Slit and Kaba**

Item	Percentage
Ghanaian identity	80.9
Cultural heritage	93.5
Self esteem	62.2
Sense of belonging	65.7
Admiration	89.1
Reflection of religious values	19.5
Status in society	33.5
Reflection of moral values	28.3
Reflection of age	40.0

**n = 214**

The results in Table 1 suggest that meanings attached to slit and kaba include cultural and national identities, self esteem and sense of belonging to the Ghanaian culture. The percentage of respondents who agreed with statements regarding national identity was high and nearly all respondents agreed to the statement on cultural heritage (See Table 1). These findings agree with the views of Eicher and Sumberg, (1995) that clothing as a material culture is used in the establishment of ethnic and national identities. Dogbe (2003) also explained that the use of slit and kaba at the group level has become a channel of expressing gender, ethnic, nationalist as well as

class affiliations. The results further suggest that, the respondents also use this dress to elicit positive response which in turn enhances self esteem which is line with the view of Kaiser (1997) that dress is used to develop positive self image.

**Table 2: Factors Affecting the Development of Slit and Kaba**

Factors	Influence
Western fashion	54.7
Improved sewing technology	83.1
Media	65.9
Improved skills of dressmakers	78.2

**n=214**

In terms of the development of slit and kaba all the four factors have significant effect on its development. The results in Table 2 suggest that, improved sewing technology and improved skills of dressmakers had the most effect on the production of the traditional dress. This can be attributed to the fact that it is currently easier to acquire state of the art sewing equipment. And also, the polytechnics are producing more qualified dressmakers who have gone into the manufacturing sector. The media has also influenced the evolution of the slit and kaba in terms of highlighting and portraying of new designs that are in vogue which explains the fact that culture is not static but dynamic.

**Table 3: Fabrics and Designs Used for Slit and Kaba**

Types of fabric	Percentages	Type of Designs	Percentages
Wax Prints (Traditional local fabric)	74.4	Western style catalogues	41.3
Lace	47.8	Traditional style catalogues	89.2
Batik, tie and dye (Traditional local fabric)	20.9	Dressmakers creative ability	83.0
Hand woven kente (Traditional local fabric)	47.8	Designs from the sub-region	76.5
Aso-Oke (Traditional Nigerian hand woven fabric)	21.8	Newspapers and magazines	80.5

**n=214**

Respondents were asked to rank the popularity of fabrics used for the slit and kaba and the source from which designs are selected. The results in Table 3 indicate that traditional wax print is the most popular fabric used for slit and kaba and designs are mostly selected from traditional style catalogues. The findings are in line with the view that slit and kaba is a traditional dress made in local fabrics and designs. This can be explained that, with expensive ceremonial hand woven kente beyond the reach for many, wax prints have become the most accessible cloth for most social events. Although some elements of western fashion have been incorporated in the design of slit and kaba, this dress has largely remained a traditional dress. This is consistent with the view of Salm and Falola (2002), that some African designs consist of both

traditional and western type of designs as in the case of the slit and kaba. As a result, Matthews (1979) refers to the slit and kaba as a modified traditional dress.

**Table 4: Usage of Slit and Kaba in percentages**

Functions	Usage in percentages
Home	1.3
Shopping	4.3
Work	13.0
Church	82.0
Western weddings	30.0
Funerals	91.3
Traditional Marriages	78.3
Traditional Festivals	65.2
Parties	10.0
Naming Ceremonies	72.5

**n=214**

Respondents were asked to rank how often slit and kaba is worn based on the above functions and occasions listed in Table 4. From the findings, it is clear that slit and kaba is worn more often for formal traditional occasions including funerals, traditional marriages and festivals. Similarly, the findings also show a high percentage of traditional dress usage for church. Slit and kaba utilisation in Ghana has an overwhelming significance at the individual, group and societal levels. It defines ones identity and creates a sense of belonging and self worthiness. It is also a reflection of moral as well as religious values within the socio-cultural context. Therefore the use of this dress for traditional occasions emphasises its cultural significance and underlines its importance as a traditional dress. Although church is not considered as a traditional function, slit and kaba is mostly worn to show reverence for God and the religious service.

### **Conclusion**

From the findings it can be concluded that slit and kaba is a traditional dress with strong 'cultural connotation' which serves as a link between Ghanaian identity and cultural heritage and is used to create meaning in everyday life within the society. Individuals attach several meanings which include moral, religious and self worthiness. This explains why the slit and kaba is still a popular dress form.

*Slit* and *kaba* although widely used in Ghana has received very little attention in research.

The unique contribution of this paper is its emphasis on the utilisation of this traditional dress and the meanings attached to it within the social and cultural context. By studying the development of the *slit* and *kaba*, its future utilisation in the Ghanaian context can be evaluated in relation to mass customisation.

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