

Kanga: A Culturally Embedded Swahili Textile

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Kanga are colorful, machine-produced, printed textiles worn widely by women in many parts of East Africa. These rectangular-shaped textiles measure about 66" x 44" and are sold in pairs. Most often worn as wrap garments, one *kanga* is worn around the body and the second is used as a head or shoulder covering. Generally *kanga* feature bright colors of ink printed on white, factory-produced cotton cloth. The design of each adheres to a basic structure: central motif surrounded by a wide, continuous graphic border. *Kanga* most often display a proverb or phrase in Swahili, framed just below the central motif. These phrases can take many forms, and while on research, I collected a small sample of *kanga* from the shops on Uhuru Street in Dar es Salaam. One textile displays the well-known proverb, "The village rooster doesn't crow in the city." Another exhibits the blessing, "God's love is eternal." A further example is most certainly a pointed communication: "Your meddling is my gain."

Kanga central motifs and border designs vary considerably, but generally speaking, they all possess a striking graphic sensibility. Bold colors and outlines are privileged, careful shading or gradual tonal variances are almost never present. Everyday items such as plants, animals, and other domestic objects regularly feature on *kanga*. Some *kanga* are also commemorative in theme, while others display abstract geometric patterns, which at times resemble flora or paisley-like prints. Aspirational expressions also frequent *kanga*, such ships, airplanes, and buildings.

But what makes these inexpensive and widely available textiles so fascinating are their myriad of uses. As a uniquely Swahili textile, *kanga* are culturally embedded in everyday life and used to mark transitional moments in Swahili women's lives. For example, *kanga* are commonly used to swaddle newborns and shroud the dead. While on research, one new mother shared that local hospitals insist expectant parents bring new *kanga* to welcome their child into the world. *Kanga* are commonly given as wedding gifts and also worn to celebrate upcoming nuptials. Additionally, women



wear this textile as everyday clothing, at times making use of particular Swahili phrases. Through the wearing of carefully selected *kanga* phrases, women are able to communicate beyond the bounds of polite society, making this textile a significant player in social and gender relations.

A relatively new function of the *kanga* textile is its use in tailored clothing. While in Dar es Salaam I attended Swahili Fashion Week. Now in its third year, this three-day showcase gives new and established East African designers a platform to highlight their work. I had the opportunity to speak with a few designers during this research trip, including Ailinda Sawe of Afrika Sana and Kemi Kalikawe of Naledi Designs. Both these designers create high fashion looks for the runway as well as accept clothing commissions and sell readymade designs, all tailored in part from *kanga*. This most recent development in the

ongoing story of this dynamic textile demonstrates that this dissertation project is both called for and timely. By examining both shifting and enduring functions of *kanga*, my research strives to show how women have defined themselves within Swahili society throughout the past century.

Mackenzie Moon Ryan is a third year PhD student in African art history. In November 2010, Mackenzie completed a pre-dissertation research trip to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Through the generous support of Madelyn M. Lockhart Summer Research Travel Fund and UF Office of Research, Mackenzie was able to lay the groundwork for her dissertation project.