

## AFRICAN AND EUROPEAN TRADITIONS COMBINED IN GHANA

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**Figure 1.** University of Ghana bachelor gowns with *akyempem* front facing.

has spread to many countries all over the world, including those in West Africa. This is the wearing of academic robes at university graduation ceremonies and on other occasions. Even the most modern universities in many countries still embrace this centuries old tradition (Smith and Sheard, 1970). Examples can even be seen on postage stamps of various countries (Newton, 2008). In the University of Ghana, the tradition of academic robes has been combined with the use of the kente cloth — a combination of two traditions.

Long-standing traditions are highly valued in the African culture. A fine traditional feature of life in Ghana is the use of *kente* cloth, woven in various patterns in bright primary colours, each pattern having a name and a cultural significance. The cloth is woven on a hand loom in strips about 3 inches wide, and the strips are sewn together to make up a large cloth.

Starting in Europe about 800 years ago (Hargreaves-Mawdsley, 1963), there is another tradition that





**Figure 2.** University of Ghana PhD gown with *afuakwa* front facing.



**Figure 3.** University of Ghana gown for higher doctorate with *dwenasa* front facing.

The nature of the academic dress varies somewhat in different countries. Universities in the Commonwealth countries have followed the style used in Britain, which consists of a gown, a hood (hanging down the back) and a cap (Groves, 2011). The front edges of the gown are folded back a few inches to form what is called the front facing, which is sometimes covered with silk or other material of a different colour, especially on doctoral gowns. The academic dress of the University of Ghana is distinguished by having the front facings covered with kente cloth, i.e., there is a strip of kente cloth down the front on each side.



The kente pattern used for the gowns of those with bachelors and masters degrees is called *akyempem*, meaning “you have given me a thousand pounds” (figure 1). For graduates in medicine, the kente strip is red and black, whilst other bachelor degrees have gold and black. On gowns of masters, the kente strip is white and black. The Ph.D gown has gold and black *akyempem*, alternating with gold, green and crimson *ɔwɔaforo adoben* (figure 2). The combined pattern is called *afuakwa*, meaning: “one man does not build a nation,” representing a plurality of ideas. Gowns of higher (usually honorary) doctorate degrees have a more complex *dwenasa* pattern, which can be woven only by the most experienced weavers and is normally worn only by chiefs. The meaning of this pattern (*dwenasa*) is “skill is exhausted,” which is appropriate for the highest degree (figure 3).

It is interesting that old traditions from two different cultures have been combined in this way in modern times. The result is a set of attractive gowns that are distinctive for the University of Ghana, and can be worn with dignity at academic gatherings anywhere in the world.

### References

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