

BELOVED MOTHER [©]

The Significance of Ruth Botsio's Funerary Print

CHRISTOPHER RICHARDS

ABSTRACT: On July 1, 2016, the Christ the King Catholic Church in Accra, Ghana became the site of an impromptu, yet noteworthy display of fashion. The occasion was the funeral of Ruth Botsio, a celebrated fashion icon and wife of the Independence-era politician and diplomat, Kojo Botsio. To symbolize her cultural and familial contributions, Botsio's family commissioned a unique commemorative print, which altered the conventional funerary color scheme of black and red to reflect Botsio's penchant for pink, resulting in a black fabric emblazoned with hot pink patterns. Taking inspiration from Doran Ross's scholarly contributions to the field of Ghanaian art history, this essay analyzes the symbolism of Botsio's commemorative print, attesting to the continued relevance of Herbert Cole and Ross's concept of the visual-verbal nexus and the importance of examining Ghana's textile arts. Additionally, Suzanne Gott's (2009) exploration of Asante *poatwa* and fashionable funerary dress is referenced to acknowledge the potency of Botsio's commemorative print in asserting elite status and social connections, whether actual or fictional. This sartorial disruption ultimately speaks to the inherent malleability of Ghanaian traditions and the continued innovations in Ghanaian dress practices.

KEYWORDS: Ruth Botsio, commemorative print, funerals, Ghana

Christopher Richards (c.richards66@brooklyn.cuny.edu) is an associate professor of art history at Brooklyn College in New York. His research focuses on African dress and fashion, specifically in Ghana and South Africa. His first book, *Cosmopolitanism and Women's Fashion in Ghana* was published by Routledge in Fall 2021.

“We must be humbled by the vastness of that only-apparently-small West African country whose borders surround a multitude of unsolved art historical problems, uncharted style areas, as well as untold depths and complexities of meaning and historical relationship”

(Cole and Ross 1977, 1).

Reflections on Doran Ross’s Contributions to Ghanaian Art

This introductory quote, taken from Herbert Cole and Doran Ross’s coauthored publication *The Arts of Ghana* (1977), encapsulates both the continued, scholarly fascination with Ghanaian art and the enduring relevance of Ross’s research and publications. A hallmark of his academic contributions, which has been particularly influential to my own scholarly research, was Ross’s continued dedication to exploring all forms of Ghanaian dress and textile arts. Cole and Ross (1977, 13) acknowledged the importance of dressing the body in Ghana in their aforementioned publication: “Dress and other facets of body art have always had an especially strong role in projecting the histories, values and ethnic identities of Ghanaian peoples.” They further classified Ghanaian body art as “communicative, expressive and symbolic.”

Taking direct inspiration from Ross’s scholarly contributions, this essay will examine an unusual commemorative cloth and its enactment on the occasion of Ruth Botsio’s funeral (Figure 1). I will propose that this commemorative print functioned as a form of sartorial disruption, attesting to the malleability of Ghanaian traditions, while simultaneously symbolizing the wearer’s elite social status and personal connection to the deceased, whether sincere or fabricated.

Commemorative Cloth: A Brief Overview

Commemorative cloth is a beloved, yet largely understudied subcategory of African-print fabric. As a derivation of wax print, commemorative print cloth possesses a similar history of cultural exchange: a material originally inspired by Indonesian batiks, industrialized by Europeans, consumed, commissioned, and eventually produced by Africans. Commemorative cloth is a version of “roller” or “fancy prints,” distinguished from wax print by its faster and more affordable printing method. According to Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran (2018, 32), fancy prints are “produced without any resin-resist and dye-bath processes,” employing roller or rotary-screen printing to create a design on only one side of the cotton fabric. This printing process makes the textile more efficient and affordable to produce. Fancy prints mimic the appearance of wax prints and may be referred to colloquially



Figure 1. Ruth Botsio's commemorative funeral print, "Beloved Mother." *Photo by Christopher Richards, 2016.*

as such, but they are technically distinct from their more laborious and expensive prototype.

Commemorative cloth is typically produced as a special commission in recognition of an event, individual or organization. In addition to their specialized motifs and patterns, the availability and consumption of commemorative cloths is limited, and often restricted.¹ This controlled distribution adds a degree of exclusivity to these textiles; the act of acquiring specific

1. For additional information on the distribution and sale of commemorative prints, see Spencer 1982.

commemorative cloths can visually assert an individual's privilege, social status, or personal connections.

Although European companies had been designing and producing commemorative prints specifically for Ghana since the early twentieth century, commemorative cloths likely became more accessible following the founding of Ghanaian-based wax print factories, with the first established in 1965 (Kwami 1995, 43).² This implies that the veritable renaissance for printed commemorative cloths in post-Independence Africa was equally evidenced in Ghana, although historical examples of Ghanaian-printed commemorative cloths are largely undocumented.³ In twenty-first century Ghana, commemorative cloth remains popular and relevant; perhaps the most globally recognized Ghanaian commemorative cloths were the multiple prints that celebrated Barack Obama's presidency and his 2009 visit to Ghana. Politics and elections are potent subject matters for contemporary, Ghanaian-produced commemorative cloths, as are funerary prints for influential and powerful individuals; epitomized by Ruth Botsio's funerary cloth, these commemorative prints exemplify the continued localization and ownership of industrially printed cloth in Ghana.

Thinking Pink: Ruth Botsio's Funeral and Her Commemorative Print

My initial encounter with Ruth Botsio's commemorative cloth was fortuitous; before leaving Auntie Emily's compound to start a day of research, I typically paid a casual visit to her niece Dinah, who works as a seamstress.⁴ It was during one of these visits in 2016 that I witnessed Dinah handling a particularly unusual and eye-catching fabric. It was so captivating that I photographed the mundane moment of Dinah deftly measuring the material. The fabric's limited color scheme and its predominance of black implied that it was a funerary print, but the customary red patterns were replaced with bold motifs in a shocking shade of bubblegum pink. The resulting fabric was exceptional and innovative. I immediately began questioning Dinah, but she knew little about the fabric. Following a second, serendipitous event in

2. For a detailed discussion of the earliest commemorative prints made exclusively for Ghana, see Picton 1995.

3. There are no Ghanaian commemorative cloths included in Anne M. Spencer's exhibition catalog, *In Praise of Heroes: Contemporary African Commemorative Cloth*, although there is a photograph of a Ghanaian artist designing a cloth for the Achimota School's Golden Jubilee, which was celebrated in 1977 (1982, 4).

4. Auntie Emily Asiedu is a Ghanaian woman who informally hosts researchers and scholars in her home in Accra; I have stayed with her since my first trip to Ghana in 2009.



Figure 2. Guests of Ruth Botsio's funeral on July 1, 2016 at the Christ the King Church in Accra, Ghana. *Photo by Christopher Richards, 2016.*

which an invitee of the funeral shared the event's details with me, I found myself standing outside the wall of the Christ the King Catholic Church on July 1, 2016, along with a few other spectators, to watch the funeral of Ruth Botsio and its preordained, yet informal fashion parade.

As guests for the funeral began arriving, a sea of pink and black began to form, accentuated by the large swaths of diaphanous pink fabric draped over the black and red outdoor tents (Figure 2). The fabric was worn equally by men and women, and the variations on dress styles were impressive (Figure 3). One particularly flamboyant attendee adorned the commemorative print with rhinestones and combined it with black lace; her matching skirt featured godets of black and gray material for an additional, sartorial flourish.

After several hours, I departed the event on foot. As I walked down Liberation Road, I encountered a young couple fully clad in Botsio's commemorative print, descending from a *tro tro*. After witnessing the clandestine arrival of former president Jerry John Rawlings at the funeral, followed by an attendee arriving in a Rolls Royce, I could not ignore the apparent discrepancy in social class and wealth of these late arrivals. This observation sparked similar questions to those posited by Spencer (1982, 20) in her original assessment of commemorative print cloth: "Who are the consumers of commemorative cloths? How is the cloth worn, for how long and why?" In the moment, I contemplated the inherent power of Botsio's commemorative print. Perhaps



Figure 3. A couple illustrating different orientations of Botsio's commemorative print at the Christ the King Church in Accra, Ghana. *Photo by Christopher Richards, 2016.*

it functioned as more than a means for honoring the deceased, serving as material evidence of a direct connection to Botsio, and by extension, a belonging to Accra's elite society.

Although best known as the wife of Kojo Botsio, a prominent politician during Kwame Nkrumah's presidency, Ruth Botsio was a formidable fashionista during the Independence era; her elaborate ensembles of handwoven *kente* were routinely photographed by Ghanaian newspapers and she is popularly credited with introducing the "Pompadour" hairstyle to Ghana.⁵ A closer examination of her commemorative funeral print reveals additional, embedded narratives about Botsio as a person and, more specifically, as a

5. Botsio's "Pompadour" hairstyle was achieved with chemically straightened hair, which was then pulled back and worn with a high, prominent bun.

mother. The most obvious indicator of the pattern's maternal significance is relegated to the easily overlooked selvedge; next to the pattern number are the words "Beloved Mother" (Figure 1). The inclusion of this text implies the cloth was likely commissioned by her children and sets the tone for understanding the constellation of motifs and patterns that coalesce to celebrate Botsio's maternal identity.

The main, ovular motif, which was designed horizontally, consists of a central, stepped diamond, bordered on either side by curved columns of horizontal lines (Figure 1). The overall appearance of the motif, particularly the emphasis on the stepped diamond, is reminiscent of *kente* cloth. The diamond motif, with its repetition of a diamond within a diamond, is strikingly similar to a *kente* pattern documented by Ross as *akokɔ baatan*, or "mother hen" (Ross 1998, 124). By referencing this identifiable *kente* pattern, Botsio's commemorative print immediately asserts her importance as a mother and familial leader, while the allusions to *kente* cloth imply her wealth and elite social status, and perhaps her actual affinity for wearing tailored *kente* ensembles.

The ovular motif is bordered by two horizontal lines with angular, evenly spaced patterns. Each pattern consists of two Asante stools, complete with articulated legs, placed on either side of the horizontal line. According to Ross and Silvia Forni, the Asante stool is "the quintessential symbol of Akan leadership, whether in royal, familial or military contexts" (Forni and Ross 2017, 149). The inclusion of a repeated stool motif implies that Botsio was considered a leader, both as a prominent, Independence-era woman, and as a mother—an interpretation which aligns with the print's overarching maternal narrative. Collectively, the patterns and motifs of Botsio's funeral cloth reveal the continued relevance of Cole and Ross's concept of the visual-verbal nexus, which argues that the majority of Ghanaian art forms incorporate both direct and enigmatic representations of important proverbs or oral histories (Cole and Ross 1977, 9). It is not only that Ghanaian art and aesthetics are directly linked to the poetically spoken word, but that many of these art forms visually "speak" on behalf of the creator and, in the case of Botsio's commemorative print, the wearer.

In her article on Asante hightimers, Suzanne Gott (2009, 143) argues that certain Asante women began to employ flamboyant funerary fashions as a contemporary form of *poatwa*, a historically-rooted form of asserting economic and political power through the display of costly textiles and regalia. Known as hightimers or *premanfoɔ*, these women, Gott (2009, 144) explains, "will even attend grand funerals of perfect strangers in order to have the largest possible audience for assertions of wealth and social prominence by means of their costly and flamboyant styles of fashionable dress."

Acknowledging the performative aspect of funerals in Ghana, particularly the ability of dress to evoke elite status, provides two additional interpretations for Botsio's funeral and her commemorative cloth. Being able to mobilize an entire segment of Accra's population to hurriedly acquire and commission garments from a commemorative print speaks to the influence and social prominence of Ruth Botsio, particularly when the pattern was such a deviation from funerary dress conventions. To have hundreds of attendees dressed in a print celebrating a person's identity and sartorial preferences could be considered the ultimate demonstration of *poatwa*. Acquiring the material, which essentially guaranteed entrée to the funeral, is potentially an additional expression of *poatwa*, performed by men and women alike. In the context of Botsio's funeral, possessing and wearing the commemorative print became a powerful assertion of wealth and social status, through an implied connection to the deceased. Even if an individual was not part of Botsio's milieu, her commemorative print could be employed as evidence of belonging, and as material evidence of the wearer's elite social status. This example speaks to the potential, overarching power of possessing and performing commemorative prints as a means for expressing wealth and social prestige.

The remaining element of Botsio's commemorative print is the most pronounced: its incorporation of shocking pink, which was purportedly Botsio's favorite color. That Botsio's personal affinity for pink could result in such a jarring alteration to funerary dress speaks to the malleability of Ghanaian practices deemed traditional. This sartorial disruption reflects the theories of James Clifford (2004, 156, 162), who considers tradition an "elastic term," asserting that "... native societies have always been both backward and forward looking. Loyalty to a traditional past is, in practice, a way ahead, a distinct path in the present." Allowing for such a colorful amendment expanded the accepted color scheme of funerary dress, while maintaining its relevancy and social potency. The following year, I found several funerary prints that incorporated designs of both red and pink, suggesting that Botsio's commemorative print may have impacted broader funerary dress practices in Accra.

Botsio's commemorative print serves as a vibrant, roseate reminder of the inventiveness of Ghana's cultural practices, an observation first posited by Cole and Ross (1977, 1) over forty years ago, when they characterized Ghanaians as inventors. The print demonstrates the inherent adaptability of Ghanaian funerary dress, while maintaining its historical and cultural potency. Printed fabrics, exemplified by Botsio's commemorative print, remain potent vehicles for conveying complex narratives about individual and group prestige, indicating the continued relevance of visual metaphors

as expressed through dress. This examination further demonstrates the continued importance and relevance of Cole and Ross's scholarly contributions. These publications will continue to be mined in an effort to better understand Ghana, that "apparently-small West African country whose borders surround a multitude of art historical problems" (Cole and Ross 1977, 1).

Christopher Richards
Brooklyn College–CUNY

Works Cited

- Clifford, James. 2004. "Traditional Futures." In *Questions of Tradition*, edited by Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet, 152–68. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Cole, Herbert M., and Doran H. Ross. 1977. *The Arts of Ghana*. Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California.
- Forni, Silvia, and Doran Ross. 2017. *Art Honor and Ridicule: Fante Asafo Flags from Southern Ghana*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum.
- Gott, Suzanne. 2009. "Asante *Hightimers* and the Fashionable Display of Women's Wealth in Contemporary Ghana." *Fashion Theory* 13, no. 2: 141–76.
- Gott, Suzanne, and Kristyne S. Loughran. 2018. "Introducing African-Print Fashion." In *African-Print Fashion Now!*, edited by Suzanne Gott, Kristyne S. Loughran, Betsy D. Quick and Leslie W. Rabine, 23–49. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA.
- Kwami, Atta. 1995. "Textile Design in Ghana: Extracts from a Report." In *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex*, edited by John Picton, 43. London: Barbican Art Gallery.
- Picton, John. 1995. "Technology, Tradition and Lurex: The Art of Textiles in Africa." In *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex*, edited by John Picton, 9–30. London: Barbican Art Gallery.
- Richards, Christopher. 2021. *Cosmopolitanism and Women's Fashion in Ghana: History, Artistry and Nationalist Inspirations*. London: Routledge Press.
- Ross, Doran H. 1998. "Asante Cloth Names and Motifs." In *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity*, edited by Doran H. Ross, 107–125. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.
- Spencer, Anne M. 1982. *In Praise of Heroes: Contemporary African Commemorative Cloth*. Newark, New Jersey: The Newark Museum.