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## “The President Has Gone Western on Us”: Analysis of the 2021 Ghanaian Presidential Inaugural Ceremony Dress Fashion Choice of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo

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### **Abstract:**

*In contributing to the debate on presidential dress fashion politics and diplomacy in Ghana, the study investigated the views of Ghanaian audience (respondents) on the dress fashion choice of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for his 2021 presidential inaugural ceremony. Adopting qualitative enquiry design, interviews and opinionnaires, the study elicited the views of seventeen (17) respondents comprising; fashion and textiles enthusiasts, Ghanaian cultural experts and the general public. The study found that Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo adopted Eurocentric suit for his 2021 presidential investiture. Since Eurocentric suit is culturally alien to Ghanaian dress cultural identity, its choice was described as non-nationalistic and a disservice to the textiles and fashion industry in Ghana. It is recommended that succeeding Ghanaian presidents-elect should endeavour to source their dress fashions from the rich Ghanaian traditional textiles and fashion products in order to visually communicate their Ghanaian nationalistic identity as well as promote the unique Ghanaian textiles and fashion industry to the patronage of both local and international community.*

**Keywords:** Dress fashion, Ghana, textiles, president-elect, presidential inauguration

### **1. Introduction**

Presidential inaugural ceremony in Ghana is not only statutory but a momentous day in the political lives of Ghanaians. It is a highly spirited, colourful and glamorous occasion that stitches together both local and national dignitaries, civil societies, and the enthusiastic Ghanaian public including members of the party which birthed the president-elect. Since independence, Ghana has witnessed ten presidential inaugurations for eight democratically elected presidents from 1960 to 2017 (Essel, 2019) under four republics. These inaugurations involved: Dr. Kwame Nkrumah (First Republic, 1960); Edward Akuffo-Addo (Second Republic, 1970); Dr. Hilla Limann (Third Republic, 1979) and all the Fourth Republican presidents of Ghana namely Jerry John Rawlings (two terms – 1993 & 1997), John Agyekum Kufour (two terms – 2001 & 2005), Prof. Evans Atta Mills (2009), John Dramani Mahama (2013) and Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo (2017). The eleventh presidential inaugural ceremony witnessed the inauguration of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo on January 7, 2021.

The dress choice of the Ghanaian presidents-elect has become an important subject for research due to its significance in boosting fashion and textile's identity and diplomacy beyond the borders of the country as well as its internal benefits to the sector. By delving into the history of presidential inaugural ceremonies and the dress fashion choice of presidents-elect in Ghana from 1960 to 2017, Essel (2019) revealed that seven out of the eight presidents-elect from 1960 to 2017 selected their inaugural ceremony dress fashion from the repertoire of Ghanaian fashion classics to signal their Ghanaian dress cultural identity. The only president-elect who wore the Western suit fashion for his inauguration was Edward Akuffo-Addo, the biological father of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> president of the 4<sup>th</sup> republican Ghana. In furtherance, Essel (2019) points out that though what a president-elect wears during the presidential inauguration in Ghana is non-statutory, it acts as a salient visual communication apparatus that pulls the strings of patriotism, nationalism and fosters a sense of belongingness. For these reasons, the presidents-elect of Ghana sourced their dress from the repertoire of Ghanaian fashion classics with the aim of fostering unity, nationalism, and display of Ghanaian identity.

From the historical precedence, Ghanaian presidents-elect have worn unique kente fabric designs with nationalistic symbolism that gave a sense of pride to the citizenry. For example, in the dress fashion choice of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for the 2017 inauguration, what he wore was unprecedented in the history of presidential

inauguration dress fashion choice in Ghana; it drew much renewed attention of the world to Ghana's unique fabric decorative culture in the Twenty-first century (Essel, 2019). The fabric was composed of Kente and embroidery (locally called *nwomu*) stripes that conflate to form a large and heavily patterned fabric with enhanced decorative richness and potent Ghanaian kente motifs that addresses unity, national identity, protection, good leadership qualities, and democracy. These symbolisms reinforced the need for Ghanaian dress cultural identity as advocated and championed by Kwame Nkrumah (Allman, 2004), the first democratically elected president of Ghana. Using Ghanaian-made fabric also promotes the works of the designers as well. Nana KwakuDuah II, the designer of president Nana Addo's 2017 inauguration fabric revealed that the wearing of the design by the president increased patronage of his designs and attracted many clients, both local and international to the kente business (Personal Communication, N. K. Duah II, October 18, 2020).

The enormous socio-economic and cultural benefits the textiles and fashion industry derive from what a president-elect wears on his/her inaugural ceremony and the kind of nationalistic image it portrays to both local and international audiences invite further research. It is against this background that this study examines the views of the Ghanaian public on the dress fashion choice of the then president-elect, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for his inauguration ceremony on January 7, 2021. Essel's (2019) study on the presidential inauguration ceremony took a historical path by examining what democratically elected presidents have worn from 1960 to 2017. His study decoded the visual symbolic codes and patterns of the fabric design and how dress choice articulated national pride and cultural consciousness among the citizenry. The current study focuses on the views of the audience on the dress fashion choice of the president-elect. It gives the audiences the opportunity to air their views in contributing to the debate on presidential dress fashion politics and diplomacy in Ghana.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The study was situated within the theory of symbolic interactionism founded by Blumer (1969). The symbolic interaction theory of Blumer (1969) rests on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them. Such things include everything that human beings may note in their world such as; physical objects, symbols and other human beings. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third and last premise is that these meanings are interpreted based on the social and cultural contexts of the individual. This notwithstanding, the central position of symbolic interactionism, "is that the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right" (Blumer, 1969, p. 3). Influenced by the theory of symbolic interactionism which focuses on how human beings react toward social and physical objects or symbols in view of the meanings such objects or symbols propose to humans, the study enquired the meanings generated by the respondents on the dress fashion choice of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for his 2021 presidential investiture. The meanings generated by the respondents on the dress fashion choice of Nana Akufo-Addo for his 2021 presidential inauguration were situated within the context of Ghanaian presidential dress cultural identity as pioneered and advocated by Kwame Nkrumah, the first democratically elected president of the Republic of Ghana (Allman, 2004; Essel & Amissah, 2015; Essel, 2019). Key aspects associated with the Ghanaian dress cultural identity is for Ghanaians to develop a sustained habit in always using Ghanaian magnificent traditional textiles and fashion products such as smock or kente cloth with appropriate Ghanaian traditional sandals for instance *ahenema* (Allman, 2004; Essel & Amissah, 2015; Essel, 2019; Essel, 2021).

### 2.1. Presidential Inaugural Dress Fashion Choice and National Identity Making

Dresses are worn to suit particular occasions. There are dresses for funerals, work, religious activities and other ceremonial occasions in Ghana. Such dresses are worn to speak about the wearer's identity and mood. What people wear provides the opportunity to express could be influenced by their culture, national philosophy and aesthetic. Studies have shown that fashion or what we wear is always in cultural, social, political, economic and aesthetic contexts of any given time (Frings, 1999; Ulzen-Appiah, 2003; Jamal, Maqbool & Zafar, 2013). Therefore, dress fashion has the potency to induce the way and manner people behave toward others. This means that how individuals dress and adorn themselves plays a symbolic, communicative, aesthetic role and is definitive of their cultural and social identity. The presidential inaugural ceremony is one of the most important occasions in the annals of a nation's history. In Ghana, it is a day of joy and fulfillment for the party in power and the President. This is the time when local and foreign people including very important foreign invited dignitaries' troop to the ceremonial grounds from all walks of life to grace the occasion. This day is mostly marked with pomp and pageantry with the ceremonial grounds festooned with beautiful colour combinations to accentuate the cultural aesthetic prominence of the place. The past events have witnessed participants and observers clad in beautiful traditional outfits including varied kente designs, fugu and caftan to announce their Ghanaian cultural presence. Additionally, the Chief Justice, the Supreme Court Judges, the Speaker of Parliament as well as the Clerk of Parliament also dress to showcase their offices. The Speaker of Parliament, his Clerk and other supporting staff also wear outfits decorated with adinkra motifs and kente designs to show their Ghanaian identity.

## 3. Methodology

The study utilised qualitative inquiry design to elicit the views of university fashion and textiles students and educators; cultural experts and the general public in Ghana on the dress fashion choice of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for his second term inauguration on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2021. Qualitative inquiry was utilised as it focuses on the discovery, description, interpretation of experiences and views of research respondents (Given, 2008; Acquah, 2015). Also, critical inquiry is required of researchers in an attempt to determine the meaning and value of societal artefacts (Given, 2008). Expert and homogeneous types of purposive sampling techniques was deployed to obtain a total sample size of seventeen

(17) respondents comprising five (5) university fashion and textiles students, five (5) fashion and textiles lecturers, three (3) Ghanaian cultural experts from Centre for National Culture and four (4) fashion and textiles enthusiasts. The respondents that constituted University fashion and textiles students and lecturers are individuals with deeper knowledge and/or considerable understanding relating to fashion and textile products and their sociocultural relevance. Interview was used for data collection. Respondents were asked to give their general views on the dress fashion choice of the president-elect for 2021 inauguration ceremony. Some of the respondents sent their responses through email and or WhatsApp. Data were analysed thematically ensuring the anonymity of the respondents. Pseudonyms were used instead of the actual names of the respondents.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. 2021 Dress Fashion Choice of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for the 2021 Presidential Inauguration

#### 4.1.1. Views of University Fashion and Textiles Lecturers and Students

On the occasion of the inauguration on January 7, 2021, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, the president-elect, appeared at about 12:39 pm at the inauguration grounds in a three-piece suit to fulfill a constitutional duty. Constitutionally, the president-elect is mandated to take and subscribe before Parliament the oath of allegiance and the presidential oath before assuming office as President of the Republic (Constitution of Ghana, 1992). Though what a president wears for inauguration are non-statutory (Essel, 2019), various categories of respondents shared their views on it.

The respondents vehemently said that the apparel of the president-elect, Akufo-Addo ought to effectively brand Ghana culturally to the global community since people beyond the borders of the country watch and or attend the presidential inaugural ceremonies. In the view of the respondents, Akufo-Addo was expected to look elegantly unique by dressing in a magnificent traditional kente cloth or smock with appropriate Ghanaian traditional sandals (*ahenema*) to match. They stressed that the Ghanaian culture has symbolic images such as the adinkra designs and kente motifs that are incorporated in dresses or fabric designs to emphasize the unique African and Ghanaian identity and used to communicate to the indigenes. These traditional motifs and cloth designs have philosophical connotations and colour symbolisms expressing Ghanaian cultural identity and have the tendency to promote the rich culture of the land which in effect could promote tourism. The respondents compared Akufo-Addo's dress fashion for the 2021 presidential inaugurations to previous presidential investitures in Ghana and asserted that it was inappropriate for him to wear a Western suit for the occasion (Figure 1). One of the respondents wrote that:

His Excellency Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo has been noted for wearing African dress almost daily and in most cases what he wears sends messages indicating his mood towards the situation at hand or assurance for the situation. With respect to the President's outfit during his second inaugural ceremony at the Parliament house, ... I was utterly disappointed. For me, the President was not decorated enough to rise to the occasion culturally. Dressing in a rich kente cloth with the appropriate traditional motifs with the traditional sandals to match as he did to herald his first term of office [in 2017] could have been culturally on point. In fact, culturally, swearing with the state sword when in suit is not as philosophically and aesthetically meaningful as being clad in kente cloth. I see that as a good matching pair in sync with the traditional artifacts like the drums, the presidential seat and other insignia. On the whole, the President in suit looked ordinary. He was dressed just like the invited guests and I think those in charge of his wardrobe should do well next time when given the opportunity. (Fashion and Textiles lecturer-respondent 1, January 7, 2021)

In the view of this respondent, the dress choice of the president-elect was a disappointment since it did not follow the unique dictates of Ghanaian traditional dress culture. For this, the dress choice in the eyes of the respondent was just ordinary and only fit for other meetings rather than such a crucial national ceremonial gathering. The respondent further cautioned those in charge of the president-elect's wardrobe to rethink their choice in future dress choice decisions. This view is in synch with the studies that hint that what one wears may have cultural, social, political, economic and aesthetic contexts of any given time (Frings, 1999; Ulzen-Appiah, 2003; Jamal, Maqbool & Zafar, 2013) which has the potency to induce the way and manner people behave toward him/her. Another lecturer-respondent said:

Actually, I was expecting him to wear made in Ghana outfit (kente or smock) and not the other way round. Cos [Because] over the years, celebrities and the president himself have been urging the general public to purchase made in Ghana goods, but on a special occasion like this in Ghanaian history, the president chose to wear a suit instead of our locally produced cloth. It would have been an avenue or platform to advertise our beautiful locally produced clothes to other dignitaries outside Ghana. In my [view], his outfit today is a **NO** for me. The last 4 years was better. (Fashion and Textiles lecturer-respondent 2, January 7, 2021)

The comments of respondent 2 suggest total disapproval of what the president-elect wore. This is emphasised by the capitalization and bolding of the word 'NO' as contained in her verbatim expression. Her expectation was that the choice would be traditionally inspired made in Ghana dress. For she considered the inauguration platform as an advantageous one for fashion and textiles advertisement, especially, to the outside world and dignitaries present. The expectation was that the president-elect would walk his talk of preaching to Ghanaians to patronise made in Ghana goods by doing the same. Similar views were shared by textiles student-respondents. They expressed that:

I am taken by surprise in respect of his outfit for such a memorable occasion. This is against the 2017 investiture dress code he wore which eventually added a cultural feeling and generated public interest. The symbolic

representation of Ghana's visual culture pioneered by Nkrumah has been prematurely aborted... How can you wear suit and continuously drum home a GHANA BEYOND AID. (Fashion and Textiles student-respondent 1, January 7, 2021)

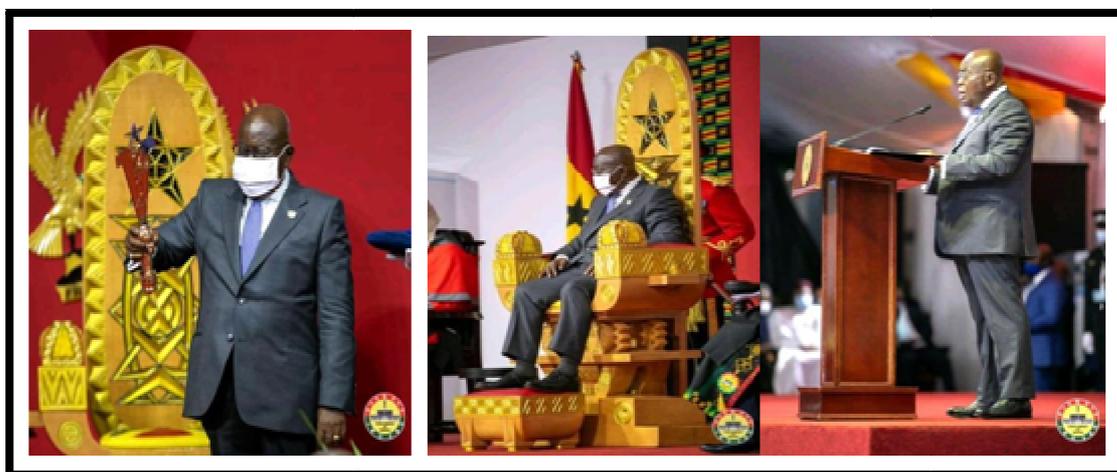
The suit was a bad outfit for the occasion because the wearing of the suit is not part of our culture. Kente would have been the best outfit for the occasion in order to sell out the country's culture since it was the biggest platform to exhibit the country's culture. (Fashion and Textiles student-respondent 2, January 7, 2021)

His outfit was not part of Ghanaians' culture. Perhaps, looking at the beefing up of security personnel to 6000, bulletproof might be the hidden agenda which the normal traditional kente couldn't have hidden. (Fashion and Textiles student-respondent 3, January 7, 2021)

It doesn't relate to Ghanaian culture. He didn't project his own culture. To me personally, it is a shame for a leader to reject his own culture. This shows that our leaders don't go by their words. I'm really disappointed. (Fashion and Textiles student-respondent 4, January 7, 2021)

As Africans, we should try and put our locally made products on the map, both citizens, and especially leaders since they're front runners of the country. I think the President should have been in a locally woven kente, since it portrays the Ghanaian culture and is a unique custom for the Ghanaian fraternity. (Fashion and Textiles student-respondent 5, January 7, 2021)

Per the views expressed, none is supportive of president Akufo-Addo's choice of Western suit fashion for his 2021 presidential investiture. Rather, the respondents expected him to have dressed in a Ghanaian traditional dress fashion as a way of transmitting the Ghanaian dress cultural identity as well as promoting the rich Ghanaian traditional fabrics to the global community. The views of the fashion and textiles lecturers and students suggest that his choice of Western dress for such a national occasion contravenes Ghana's long-fought dress cultural advancement agenda that was advocated by Kwame Nkrumah (Botwe-Asamoah, 2005; Essel&Amissah, 2015). The main reason behind Nkrumah's advocacy for a dress cultural advancement for Ghana was premised on the case that clothing was one of the means through which the British used to colonise Ghana and as a measure of civilization (Allman, 2004; Essel, 2019). Therefore, Nkrumah felt that the use of indigenous Ghanaian fashion by Ghanaian top leadership would significantly help in decolonising the minds of Ghanaians as it signifies a break away from the shackles of colonialism, serves as a dress cultural visual aesthetic order for Ghanaians and promote the use of made in Ghana clothing (Botwe-Asamoah, 2005; Essel, 2014; Essel&Amissah, 2015). In view of this, Essel (2019) reports that seven out of eight democratically elected presidents (from 1960-2017) with Nkrumah as the pacesetter, selected their inaugural ceremony dress fashions from the repertoire of Ghanaian classics to signal their Ghanaian dress cultural identity. This implies that the dress of the president of Ghana for national and international functions are supposed to be sourced from the Ghanaian local fashion and textiles products in order to reflect the Ghanaian identity and promote her rich fashion and textile products both locally and globally. This has the tendency to perpetuate and promote the patronage of Ghanaian fashion and textile products for national development.



*Figure 1: President-Elect, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, Dressed Eurocentric During His Inaugural Ceremony on January 7, 2021, As President of the Republic of Ghana (Image Courtesy: Parliament of Ghana Website, 2021)*

#### 4.1.2. Views of Ghanaian Cultural Experts on Akufo-Addo's 2021 Presidential Inaugural Dress Choice

The views of the cultural experts on Akufo-Addo's 2021 presidential inaugural dress fashion choice are similar to that of the fashion and textiles students cum lecturers herein discussed. The cultural expert-respondents were of the view that the dress fashion (Figure 1) of the president-elect (Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo) for his inaugural ceremony on January 7, 2021, is alien to typical Ghanaian dress culture. The cultural expert-respondents further stressed that although the wearing of Eurocentric suits and other borrowed dress fashion is predominant in Ghana, such dress fashions are culturally non-representative of the true identity of the Ghanaian people. They believed that Akufo-Addo's 2021 presidential inaugural dress fashion choice was a minus to the long-held advocacy for Ghanaians to appreciate and utilize their cultural identity of which dress remains central. The cultural expert-respondents held that Akufo-Addo made Ghana proud in the past with regards to his use of African print dressing which has had a great influence on Ghanaians,

particularly the youth. A classic example of this is his use of Ghana kente and embroidery apparel for his maiden presidential inaugural ceremony on January 7, 2017. That outfit has been described as the most outstanding Ghanaian traditional dress fashion ever used in the history of the presidential inaugural ceremony in Ghana (Essel, 2019) because of its cultural uniqueness and relevance. Unfortunately, his 2021 presidential inaugural dress fashion choice was a complete retrogression to the advocacy for Ghanaians to revisit the wearing of local textile products in order to promote Ghanaian cultural identity as embedded in the cultural policy of Ghana (2004). One of the cultural expert-respondents emphasised that "his outfit for the occasion was inconsistent with Ghanaian traditional culture. It has been a practice for elected presidents in Ghana to wear traditional outfits for swearing-in ceremonies since Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah's time" (Cultural Expert-respondent 1, January 7, 2021). Another respondent expressed that 'the President has gone Western on us with what he wore. We have lost a great opportunity to advertise our unique textiles to the outside world using the inauguration platform.' The aforementioned views are consistent with Essel's (2019) finding that since 1960, all the Ghanaian presidents-elect except one selected their inaugural ceremony dress fashion from the repertoire of Ghanaian fashion classics to signal their Ghanaian dress cultural identity. Although the practice of adopting Ghanaian traditional dress fashion for the presidential inaugural ceremony is largely the case in the past, it is non-statutory. Therefore, the shortfall is that there is no backing legislation to ban the use of non-Ghanaian dress fashion for presidential inaugural ceremony.

#### 4.1.3. Views of Ghanaian Public on Akufo-Addo's 2021 Presidential Inaugural Dress Fashion Choice

Generally, the views elicited from the Ghanaian public suggested that Akufo-Addo's 2021 presidential inaugural Eurocentric dress fashion (Figure 1) is irreconcilable with the typical Ghanaian cultural dress codes which revolve around the use of kente, smock and other Ghanaian printed fabrics. The views expressed by the general public-respondents indicate that Akufo-Addo's inaugural outfit did not show anything Ghanaian but was rather more of foreign and the usual suit fashion of the business class. Some of the general public-respondents were of the view that outfit and overall physical appearance is usually the first point of reference for people; and during public occasions, outfits of lead participants set the tone of such programmes. The respondents felt that Akufo-Addo's choice of Eurocentric suit for his 2021 presidential inauguration was in cultural contradiction and did not depict his Ghanaian cultural identity. However, some of the respondents in this category attributed Akufo-Addo's choice of Eurocentric suit outfit as a security measure to enable him to wear a bullet vest underneath due to the political tension in the morning before the inauguration. The political tension herein referred to by the respondents could be the telecast anarchy of verbal and physical assaults, destruction of polling booths and snatching of ballots during the election of the speaker of parliament in the parliament house of Ghana which unfortunately preceded the presidential inauguration the same day. It was also argued by one of the general public-respondents that Akufo-Addo's choice of Eurocentric suit was nothing but a deliberate repetition of the Eurocentric inaugural dress code of his late father, Edward Akufo-Addo who was inaugurated as the second republican president of Ghana in 1970. He wrote:

Nana Addo's choice of similar Eurocentric fashion for his swearing-in just as his late father, to ... communicate to the viewing public that he has, for the second occasion, risen to occupy the Ghanaian presidential throne... Be it as it may, Nana Addo's choice of Eurocentric suit and tie for his swearing-in ceremony is equivalent to icing Ghana's dress cultural advancement agenda that was pioneered by Kwame Nkrumah and desirously advanced by all the succeeding elected presidents of Ghana. (General Public Respondent 1, January 7, 2021)

The views espoused by the general public-respondents are consistent with the findings of Essel (2019) that identified Edward Akufo-Addo as the only elected president to have worn Western suit fashion for the presidential inauguration. This means that from independence up to 2021, Edward Akufo-Addo and his son Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo were the only two presidents who adopted Western suit fashion in the history of presidential inaugurations.

## **5. Conclusions**

The study examined the views of the Ghanaian public on the dress fashion choice of the then president-elect, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for his inauguration ceremony on January 7, 2021. It concluded that the choice of Western dress (suit) by Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo for his presidential investiture on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2021 is alien to the Ghanaian dress cultural identity and, therefore, culturally irrelevant. The views expressed by all the categories of respondents (fashion and textiles lecturers and students, culture experts and the general public and fashion enthusiasts) unanimously described the Western dress adopted by Akufo-Addo for his inaugural ceremony as non-nationalistic as far as the cultural identity advancement of Ghana is concerned.

This implies that the appearance of the president-elect in his Western dress fashion raised questions in the minds of cultural experts, enthusiasts and educators in the fashion and textiles fraternity and the general public. With such an important occasion as the presidential investiture, the dress fashion choice of the president-elect is of significant consideration to the fashion and textiles sector. It is, therefore, recommended that succeeding Ghanaian presidents-elect must endeavour to source their dress fashions from the rich Ghanaian traditional fashion and textile products in order to visually communicate their Ghanaian nationalistic identity as well as promote the unique Ghanaian fashion and textile industry for the patronage of both local and international community. This also promotes Ghanaian visual culture. Again, due to the cultural relevance, nationalistic ideologies and identity, socio-economic gains and visual cultural sense of what presidents-elect wear on inauguration ceremonies, Ghana's parliament must consider making what the president wears statutory by passing it into law since it has positive implications for the nation's visual culture. Again, presidents-elect must employ the services of professional fashion stylists with a strong knowledge base on authentic Ghanaian surface and structural designs and traditional textiles, fabric symbolisms, and fashion diplomacy to manage their wardrobes.

Presidential inaugural ceremonies featured as a potent advertising platform for the promotion of Ghanaian textiles and fashion products. The Ghanaian presidential inauguration event planning committees must consider holding at least a week's textiles and fashion exhibition and trade show that may end on the eve of the date of the inauguration to boost local trade and tourism since lots of foreign dignitaries visit the country during such period.

Ghanaians have high expectations from presidents-elect (and or presidents) to a large extent promote made in Ghana textiles and fashion products through their deeds and not only words. With this, they expect the leaders to use the fashion and textiles products consistently in and outside the nation to boost trade. Succeeding presidents-elect must be action-oriented in that regard to win the cooperation of the citizenry for better development of the nation.

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