Venny Nakazibwe: Bark-Cloth Of The Baganda People Of Southern Uganda: A Record of continuity and change crom che Late eighteenth Century to the early Twenty-First Century

Abstract

Despite the increased interest in the study of the history of African textiles since the last quarter of the past century, less attention has been paid to the study of bark-cloth, a fabric design tradition that predates the technology of weaving. Made by way of striping, scrapping and beating the inner bark of certain plants, most commonly the ficus species, bark-cloth served various socio-cultural functions among different ethnic communities in Africa, Southeast Asia, South America, and in the Polynesian islands of the Southern Pacific. This study examines the notion of continuity and change in the role and meaning of bark-cloth of the Baganda people of the kingdom of Buganda in southern Uganda, in East Africa, from the late eighteenth-century to the early twenty-first century. Used in various forms, including among others, as a shroud, and during the investiture of the heir to the throne, and to the heads of the independent family units, bark-cloth has continued to serve as a connecting thread between the past and present generations of the Baganda society.

However, the study also reveals that the role and meaning of bark-cloth of the Baganda is no longer confined within the cultural boundaries; other factors have come into play since the mid nineteenth-century when the external (non-African) communities first infiltrated the interior of East Africa. It has been argued that the role and meaning of bark-cloth of the Baganda is in a continuous flux contingent on the dynamics of the social, economic, cultural and political structures at a given historical moment in Buganda. Hence, the study analyses the extent of Swahili-Arab influence, Western Christianity, colonialism and education, international tourism, intra-regional and regional trade, and local politics to the redefinition of bark-cloth of the Baganda in the past almost two and half centuries. The study makes an important and necessary contribution to scholarship of the history of East African textiles and material culture.