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The Shared History of Bandana and George Textiles: *A Cultural Journey from India to Africa and the Caribbean*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
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The Shared History of Bandana and George Textiles: A Cultural Journey from India to Africa and the Caribbean

By Chuka Odié · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

Textiles have long been a medium of cultural exchange and storytelling, bridging continents and peoples. The journey of the Jamaican bandana and the George cloth begins in Madras (modern-day Chennai), India, and stretches across West Africa to the Caribbean. These fabrics, originally tied to colonial trade and slavery, have been reimagined and adopted by diverse communities, leaving an indelible cultural legacy. This article explores their origins, transformations, and cultural significance among the peoples of West Africa and the Afro-Caribbean diaspora.

01

The Indian Origins: Bandana and George Cloth

Both the Jamaican bandana and George cloth have their roots in Madras, India. The word “bandana” derives from the Hindi term *bandhani*, meaning “to tie,” referencing the traditional tie-dye technique used to create intricate patterns on the fabric. George cloth, on the other hand, takes its name from “St. George,” a British fort established in Madras during the 17th century. The British colonizers introduced both textiles into global trade networks, exporting them to West Africa and the Caribbean.

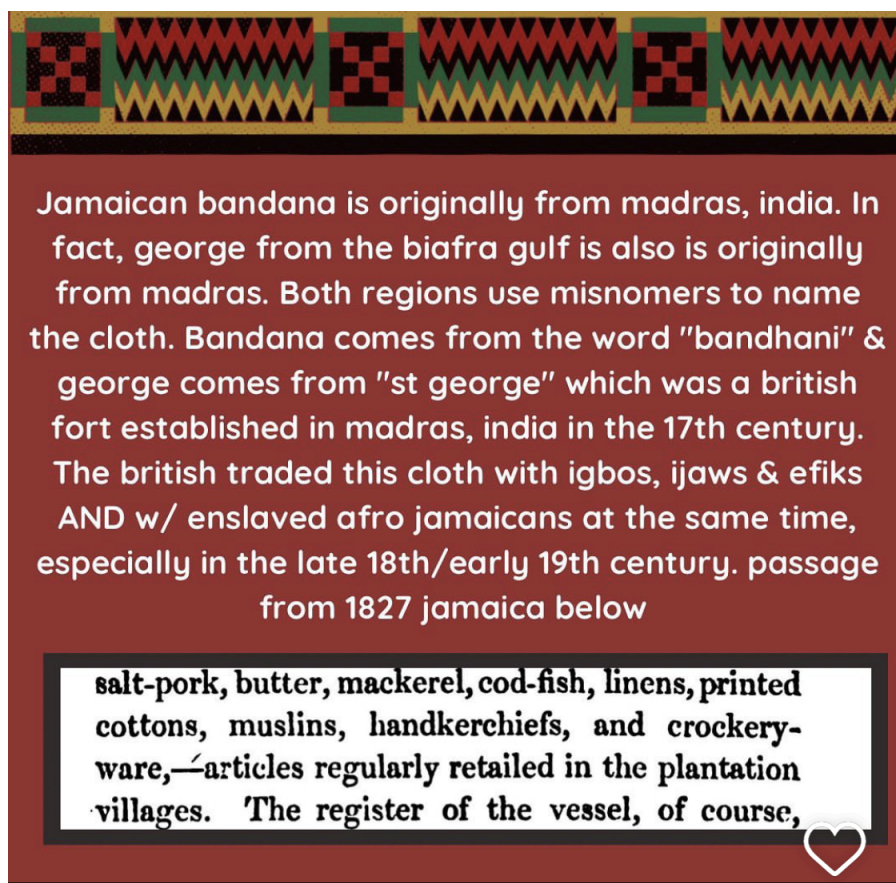


Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

These fabrics became key commodities in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as reflected in trade records. A description from Jamaica in 1827 lists printed cottons, muslins, and handkerchiefs—materials that enslaved Afro-Caribbean people would later incorporate into their cultural practices.

02

George Cloth in the Bight of Biafra and the Caribbean

The British established direct trade connections with coastal groups in the Bight of Biafra, which included the Ijaw, Igbo, Efik, and Ibibio peoples. George cloth quickly became a cultural staple in this region. Among riverine communities, such as the Ijaw, Ikwerre, and Ndoki Igbo, the cloth gained significance as ceremonial attire. It was often

paired with white garments, reflecting a symbolism tied to purity or status. Inland communities adopted George cloth differently, often wrapping the fabric around their entire bodies as a traditional garment.

The british had direct contact with coastal groups in the bight of biafra. This is why plain george is associated with riverine igbo speakers as well as ijaws, bc they first had access to this cloth via trade. The fact that this cloth was used in various groups in the region, means that afro caribbean ppl certainly were familiar with it upon arrival in the caribbean during slavery. & bc the caribbean as a whole recieved the bulk of bight of biafran captives, that explains why you can find this textile print on other islands. can you tell which one is plain george & which one is bandana?



Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

This cultural continuity extended to the Caribbean. Enslaved Africans, particularly those from the Bight of Biafra, recognized George cloth upon their arrival in Jamaica and other islands. They integrated the fabric into dances, rituals, and daily life, contributing to its prominence in Afro-Caribbean culture. The cloth's versatility and symbolism solidified its importance as a medium of self-expression and identity.

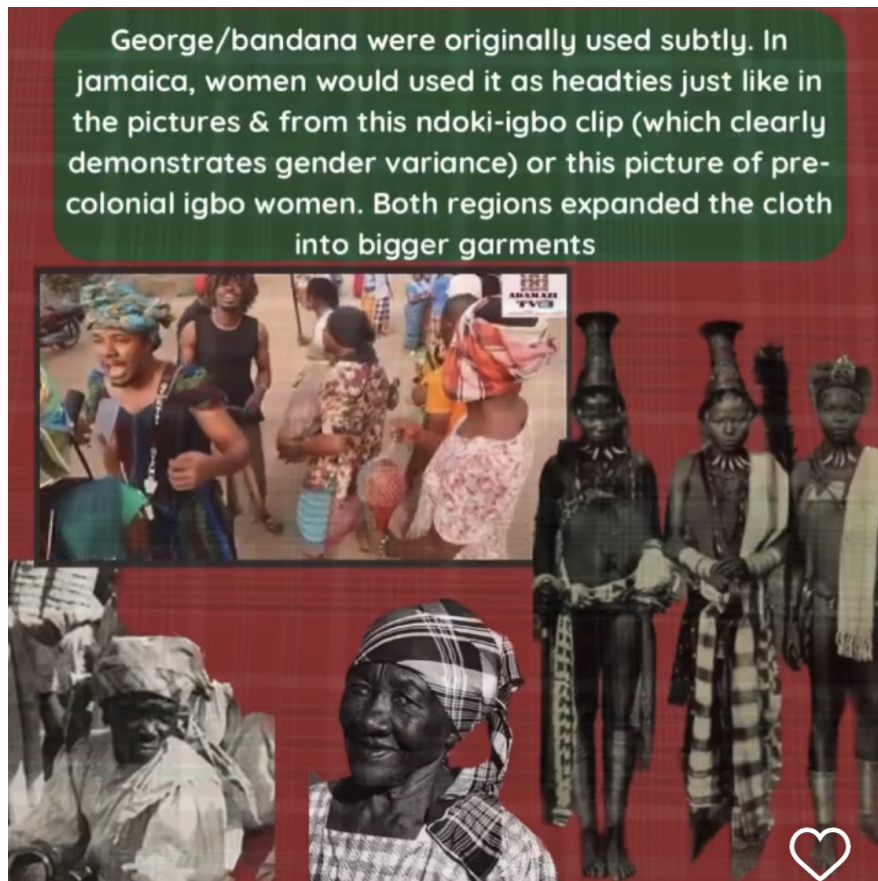


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03

Bandana's Transformation in Jamaica

In Jamaica, the bandana evolved from its initial subtle use as a head tie to a broader garment incorporated into cultural practices. Afro-Jamaican women, drawing inspiration from African traditions, expanded its role. The vibrant patterns and bold colors of the bandana became synonymous with Jamaican identity, a reflection of its African and Indian origins.

The adoption of bandana and George cloth by enslaved Afro-Jamaicans highlights the cultural resilience of African-descended peoples. By reimagining these imported textiles, they forged a connection to their ancestral heritage, even under the constraints of slavery and

colonialism.



Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

04

Textiles and Identity in the African Diaspora

The shared history of bandana and George cloth underscores the interconnectedness of West Africa and the Caribbean. While these fabrics are not indigenous to Africa, they have been embraced and celebrated by African-descended communities, becoming symbols of identity and cultural pride.

Modern Jamaicans continue to draw inspiration from African textiles like hitarget and hollandis, alongside George cloth. These fabrics are often incorporated into dances, ceremonies, and other cultural

expressions, serving as reminders of the African heritage that underpins Jamaican culture.

In addition to these imported textiles, indigenous African fabrics like the Akwete cloth of the Ndoki Igbo highlight the region's rich textile traditions. Akwete cloth, handwoven with intricate patterns, reflects the artistry and creativity of African textile production.



Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

05

Cultural Significance and Gender Variance

In both West Africa and Jamaica, textiles like George cloth and bandana were not only utilitarian but also held deep cultural and symbolic meanings. In riverine communities of the Bight of Biafra,

George cloth became associated with ceremonial attire and community identity. It was also used in pre-colonial societies where gender and leadership roles were not strictly tied to biological categories. For example, the Ndoki Igbo's depiction of gender variance and the Mgburichi title demonstrate how African societies viewed power and identity through a lens far removed from European hierarchies.

This cultural fluidity continued in the Caribbean, where enslaved Africans adapted these textiles for both everyday use and ceremonial purposes. The enduring presence of George cloth in Jamaica and other islands demonstrates its role in maintaining a sense of cultural continuity and resilience.

Enslaved igbos, ijaws, ibibio/efiks would have certainly recognized this cloth in the caribbean. It is these groups that popularized the cloth among the afro-jamaican community & now it is used in various dances, ceremonies & expressions.



Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

Conclusion

The journey of bandana and George textiles from Madras, India, to West Africa and the Caribbean illustrates the enduring power of cultural exchange and adaptation. These fabrics, though products of colonial trade, have been reimagined by African and Afro-Caribbean communities as markers of identity, creativity, and heritage. Today, they remain celebrated symbols of resilience, connecting the people of the African diaspora to their roots.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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