



▶ **Red Ribbon
Living Well**

▶ **GILEAD SEWING
PROJECT 2024**



INTRODUCTION

The Gilead Sewing Project has been one of Red Ribbon Living Well's most impactful initiatives in 2023 and 2024, aimed at providing participants with practical skills, a sense of community, and emotional support. The project began by offering regular, structured sewing sessions, attended consistently by 15 participants. These sessions were designed not only to teach technical skills but also to encourage creativity and self-expression. Initially, participants started by creating simple items such as bags and cushions, gradually advancing to more complex clothing projects as their confidence and skills grew. This progression allowed members to see their own development over time, boosting their sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

One of the challenges encountered during the project was the difficulty in sourcing culturally appropriate materials, as participants came from diverse backgrounds with different needs and preferences. To overcome this, Red Ribbon Living Well established partnerships with local suppliers and community organizations to access a wider range of fabrics that met the cultural and aesthetic preferences of the group. This collaborative approach not only resolved the material shortage but also strengthened community ties, as local partners became more involved in the project. By addressing these challenges through community partnerships, the project was able to maintain its momentum and ensure that all participants had the resources they needed to succeed.

The impact of the Gilead Sewing Project extends far beyond the acquisition of sewing skills. It has created a safe and supportive learning environment where participants can bond over shared experiences, providing emotional and mental health benefits in addition to the practical training. Many participants reported feeling more connected to their community and better equipped to handle life's challenges because of their involvement in the project. The sewing sessions also offered a form of therapeutic engagement, allowing individuals to focus on creative tasks while receiving peer support. Overall, the project has significantly contributed to participants' well-being, offering them a valuable outlet for skill development and emotional growth.

Husseina Hamza, CEO, Red Ribbon Living Well



"Regardless of specialized knowledge or technical vocabulary, by virtue of wearing garments, sleeping among linens, and sitting on upholstered surfaces, we are all de facto experts in textiles" (Julia Bryan Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, 2017).



"Sewing offers a sense of community, real or virtual, and brings otherwise disparate people together through common interests and aspirations [...] The practice of sewing gives us a framework for thinking about human resilience and well-being in the here and now, as well as approaches to more sustainable living and our connections with the past. In this day and age, the work of hands and eyes and the flourishing of human ingenuity and creativity becomes ever more important." (Barbara Burman, *The Point of the Needle: Why Sewing Matters*, 2023, pp 11-12).



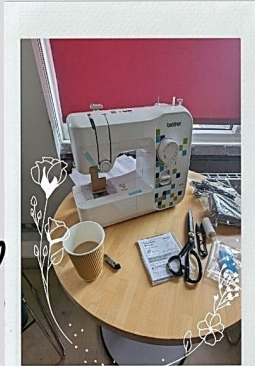
"Researchers worked with pupils in year 9 of a school in Birmingham, who took part in weekly hour-long relaxed stitching sessions across two months. The results were not only a variety of inventive and impressive sewn creations, but also an overall increase in feelings of pride, and improved self-esteem and confidence." (About research by Catherine Howard et al, recorded in the *Journal of Textile Design Research and Practice*, Volume 10, 2022).



"Africa, a continent teeming with diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, is also a vibrant tapestry of textile artistry. Woven into the fabric of daily life, African tribal textile patterns are more than just aesthetic embellishments; they are intricate stories, symbols of identity, and reflections of ancestral knowledge passed down through generations." ("African Tribal Textile Patterns: A Historical Perspective," 2024, posted on the african.nativetribe.info website).



Process



Sewing machine



Peer support



Piers

Sewing & Knitting



Designing



new hobby



Support



Image maker



CREATIVITY, CONFIDENCE, COMMUNITY, CULTURE & CARE: The Red Ribbon Living Well Sewing Workshops

There is ample research to show that involvement in art, craft and textile activities is beneficial to our health, including our mental health, and that when such activities are carried out in community, they significantly help strengthen bonds. This has been our experience!



Our Textiles Journey

Red Ribbon Living Well (RRLW) is a community-led voluntary organisation supporting mainly Black African people living with HIV in Lewisham and surrounding areas. The group was founded in 2009 by members who recognised the need for peer support in the community, and it has grown from its grass-roots beginnings.

RRLW and I have collaborated on textile-based projects since 2021. Our first project was to create four large, appliqued blankets. These enabled RRLW to express the often difficult-to-verbalise evolving stories of the organisation and its members in a visual and material form.

Once completed, the blankets, named by the group as “The Red Ribbon Living Well Free Travelling Blankets,” were publicly displayed for the first time at the group’s first outreach event for World AIDS Day 2021, and then formed the backdrop for an accelerating programme of outreach events RRLW began to participate in. Recently, the blankets were part of the Deptford People's Heritage Museum project and exhibition “The Monument is the Struggle” (Deptford Lounge, London, 28 Sept-31 October 2024) which was funded by the Mayor of London’s “Untold Stories” project. The exhibition included a public event called “Empowerment through Visual and Textile Storytelling.”



**WE ARE HERE ...
WE ARE ON THE MOVE: EMPOWERMENT
THROUGH VISUAL AND TEXTILE
STORYTELLING**

**17 OCTOBER 2024
2 - 4 PM**

**DEPTFORD LOUNGE
9 GIFFIN ST,
LONDON SE8 4RJ**

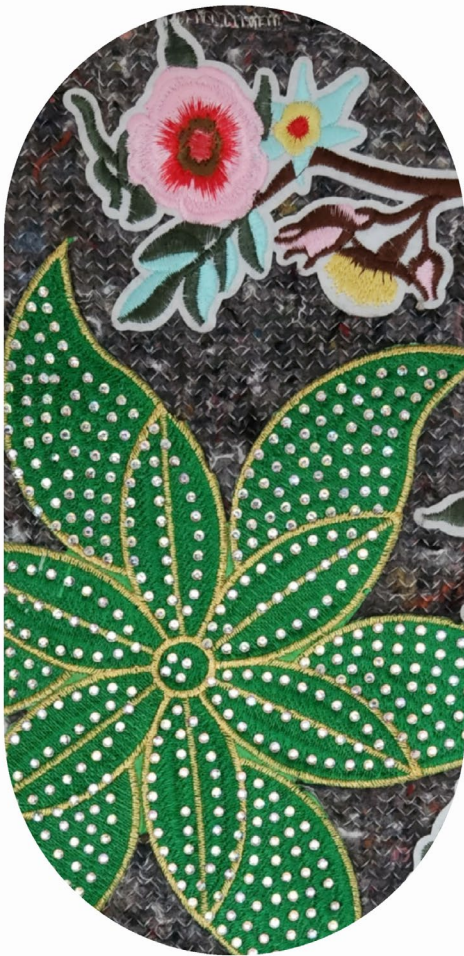


**DEPTFORD
PEOPLE'S
HERITAGE MUSEUM**

MAYOR OF LONDON

**Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

The blankets were also key props used in a series of seven short films, “We are Here ... We Are On The Move” (2024) which were also part of the RRLW display. These films tell RRLW’s inspiring story from its beginnings to today and may be viewed either via the Deptford People's Heritage Museum’s “The Monument is the Struggle” webpage (see <https://dphm.org/>) or, from 2025, via QR codes physically located in Lewisham.



"I like flowers and most of my creativity is flowers ... So that is why I chose to make these patterns of flowers. And flowers are sometimes beautiful to smell, to look at, can make you smile. Especially, actually, when I came to this country, I found that flowers are very important to people. I saw that when someone is sick, they send flowers. Or when someone goes and visits a house, they bring flowers, so I think flowers are a symbol of friendship, a symbol of love, care. Yes, that's why I chose the flowers."

- Hussein Hamza



"We are mostly from Africa and textiles are very, very important for us [just as] flowers are in the UK. Textiles are precious, very important for our culture. When you go to see a friend, when you go to a wedding, when you go to see a baby that is born, you have to carry a textile. And cloth, yes, that was very interesting to work with and everyone found that okay. We felt at home"

- Hussein Hamza

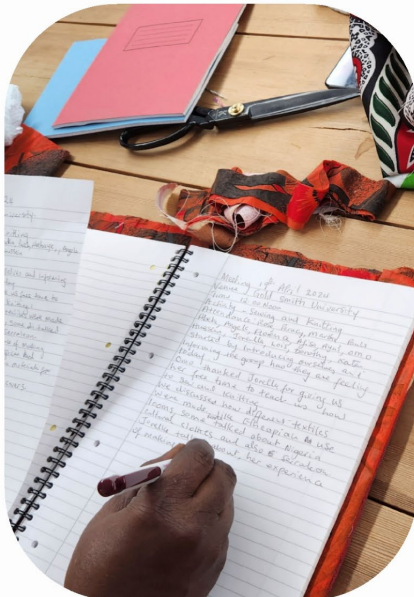


The Gilead Sewing Project

On the one hand, RRLW's blanket-making project helped clarify and motivate the group's collective mission. On the other hand, members found the work refreshing and strengthening because it reconnected them to creative passions that had become obscured over the years by the weight of diagnosis and everyday struggle. In fact, these two impacts were mutually supportive. Therefore, it was no surprise that many RRLW members expressed the desire to learn how to sew "properly"!

In an interview with RRLW CEO Husseina Hamza, I learned that textiles have great significance all over Africa, not only for practical purposes but also for the purposes of gift giving and memorialisation, much as British people love to communicate affection and mark occasions through the giving of flowers. This helped explain why working with textiles and learning and improving sewing skills would have a deep emotional and symbolic resonance for RRLW members.

While many members considered themselves to be learners, several group members had expertise in sewing and dressmaking and they took on a key role in terms of teaching their peers. Our projects were designed to be simple and sustainable as well as useful, whether for personal use, or made as gifts, or as part of potential fund-raising ventures: we created utensil holders, reusable notebook covers, and reversible tote bags. RRLW members soon also branched out to work with crochet and created a collaboratively made baby blanket (now sold) as well as beautiful and original jewellery made from crochet. The sense of joy and achievement released by the workshops has kept growing.



As well as sewing and crocheting, a further outcome of our sessions was that we began to have conversations about the importance of textiles in our lives, and members began bringing in, and talking about these items and their personal and wider cultural significance.

As we reflected on the sewing workshops, we realised that there had been five important benefits:

- ❖ **Creativity** - making beautiful items, celebrating new and existing creative passions and ideas, and learning about new or unusual textile techniques.
- ❖ **Confidence** - learning new skills, sharing skills, teaching each other, and being inspired.
- ❖ **Community** - deepening relationship within the group by being creative together and learning more about our individual histories, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Growing in solidarity through peer support, caring, and sharing.
- ❖ **Culture** - storytelling related to the significance of textiles in Africa, and the significance of much-loved personal textile items.
- ❖ **Care** - seeking to enrich the wider community by creating textile items that will be given as gifts or sold for others to enjoy. Sharing with the wider community the positive impacts we have experienced of creativity and craft on our health, particularly our mental health.

The project was generously funded by Gilead Science, which produces HIV medication. Thanks to Gilead, the group was able to purchase two sewing machines as well as build up a collection of textiles and haberdashery, which continues to be put to creative use.

Jorella Andrews (Professor Emeritus), Goldsmiths



“I really enjoyed the workshops. I got on the sewing machine for the first time ... I enjoyed the help from each other, the peer support, working together as a team.”



"I am inspired and relaxed with my friends. I learned how to sew backwards, something I didn't know. I learned how to use the sewing machine. Very relaxing and encouraging."



“Making covers for my notebooks was enjoyable and empowering. I became confident using the sewing machine and cutting different patterns. The utensil organiser which I made was very useful. Now I can carry my mobile phone and a notebook easily”



“The sewing was very interesting because I sewed my utensils organiser for my pen, pencil and ballpoint pen. My organiser was presented to the visitors from Ontario as gifts from the Red Ribbon Living Well project. I feel so good to have given my organiser.”



“It has been a challenge at first as I have never used a machine or know how to put thread into the needle. I have done a material cover for my notebook which I am going to write my notes during the project. I am so grateful.”



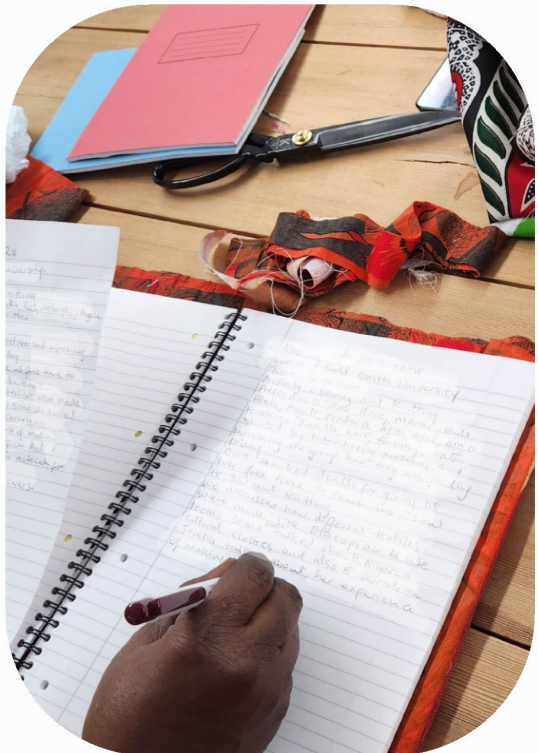
“So inspiring ... sense of togetherness ... sense of belonging ... educative ... creative ... family business ...”

Creativity

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of blue, ranging from light sky blue to deep navy blue. These shapes are primarily located on the right side of the page, creating a dynamic, modern aesthetic. The word "Creativity" is centered in a clean, black, sans-serif font.



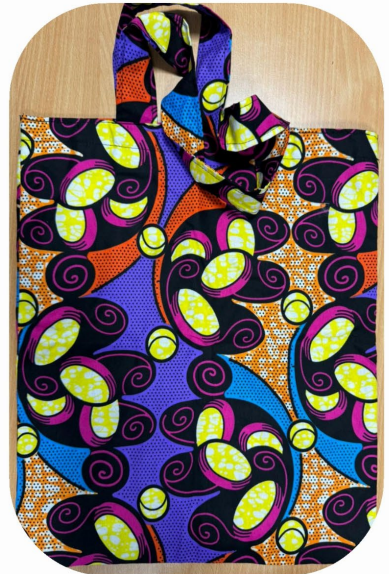
Utensil holders



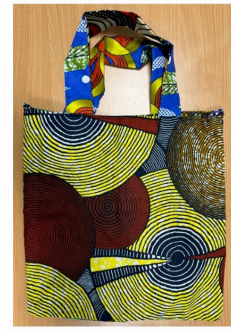
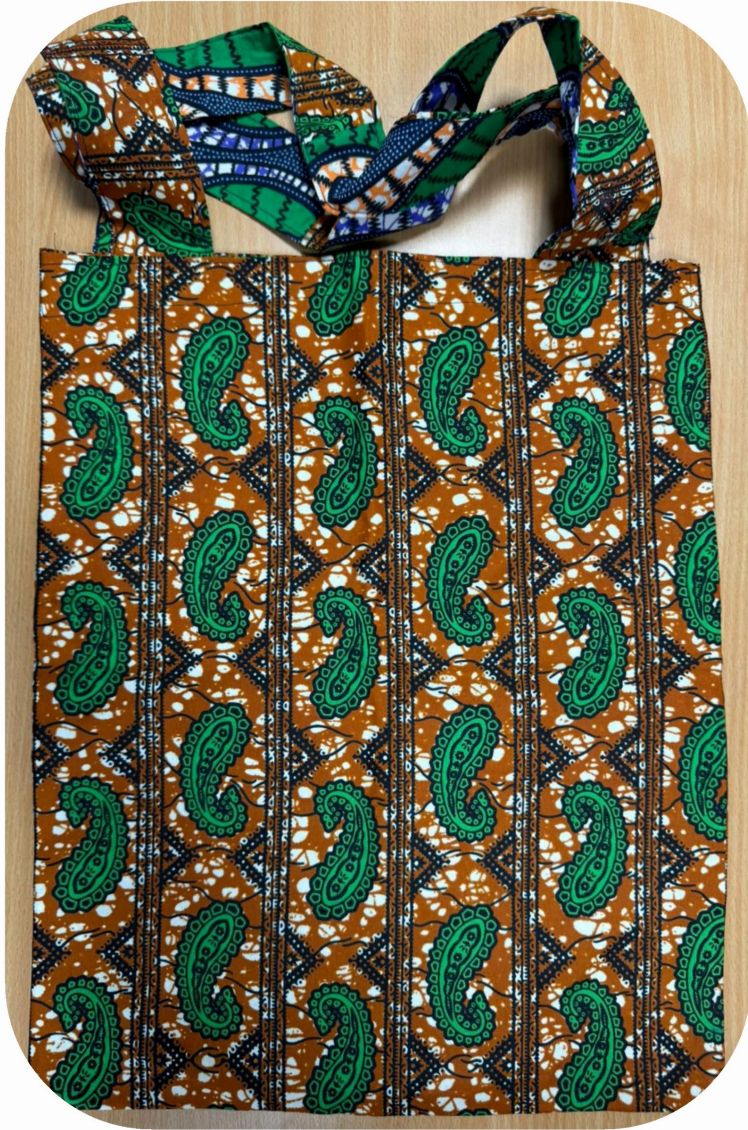
Notebook covers

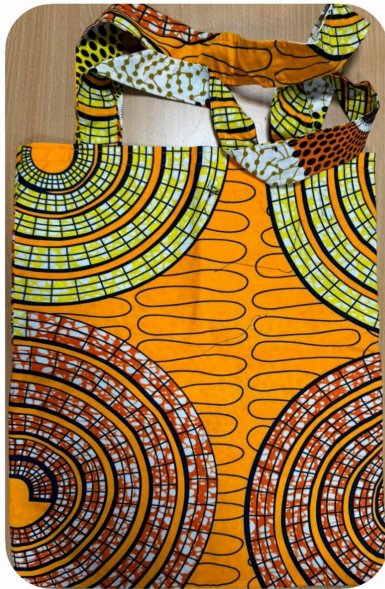






Reversible Tote bags



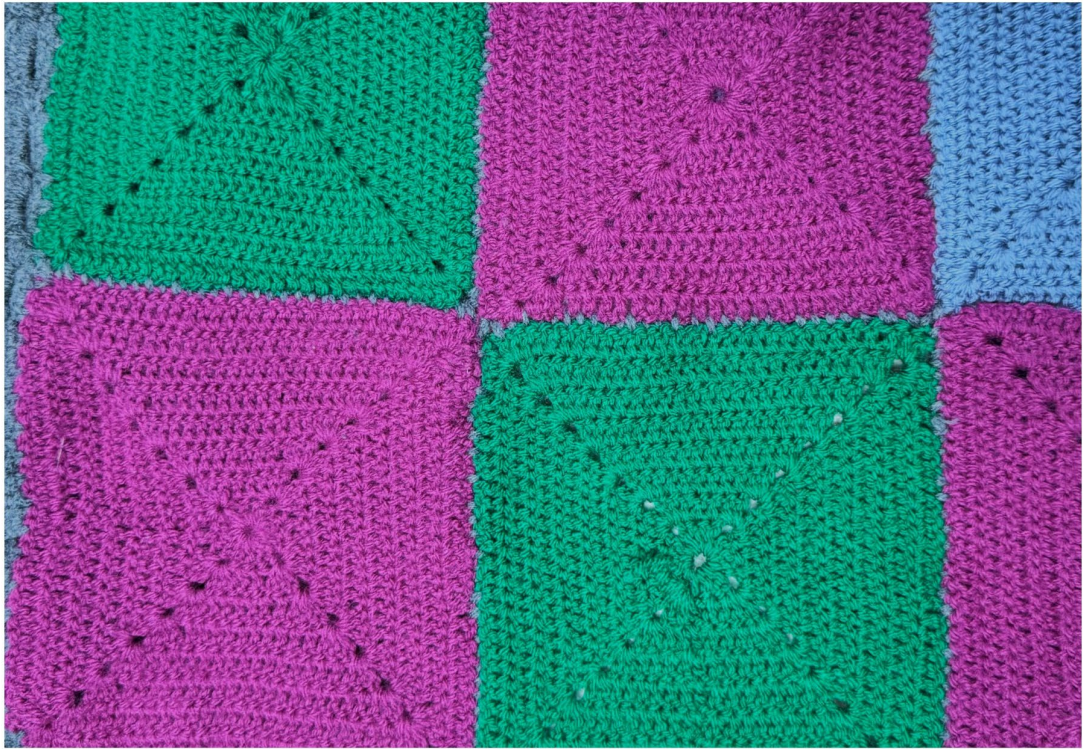




Brooches



Hat and bow ties



Baby blanket





Bag



Earrings





RED RIBBON LIVING WELL

WORLD AIDS DAY 2024 EXHIBITION INVENTORY

ITEM CATEGORY	ITEM NUMBER	PROJECT OWNER
Flowers	4 Pieces	Elizabeth Mwango
Bow Ties	2 Pieces	All-Member Project
Ear Rings	21 Pieces	Martha Dibesa / Anna Tupa / Dorothy Okoth /
Pencil Make-Up Pouches	9 Pieces	All-Member Project
Maasai Sandals	2 Pairs	Amran Sayid
Book Covers	2 Pieces	All-Member Project
Women Dress	1 Piece	Amran Sayid
Tote Bags (African Fabric)	17 Pieces	All-Member Project
Knitted Woolen Blankets	3 Pieces	Dorothy Okoth / Anna Tupa
Mini Butterfly Lapels	4 Pieces	Martha Dibesa
Knitted Woolen Handbag	1 Piece	Martha Dibesa
Beaded Table Mats	15 Pieces	Afisa Nalubega

Culture

The image features a white background with a large, abstract graphic on the right side. This graphic consists of several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of orange and yellow, creating a dynamic, layered effect. The shapes are primarily vertical and triangular, extending from the top to the bottom of the page. The word "Culture" is centered in the white space, rendered in a bold, black, sans-serif font.



Aso-Oke Fabric is a handwoven cloth that originated from the Yoruba people Yorubaland within Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Usually woven by men, the fabric is used to make men's gown (called Agbada) and hats (called Fila) as well as Yoruba women's blouses (called Buba) and a gown (called Komola), as well as a head tie (called Gele and Soan).

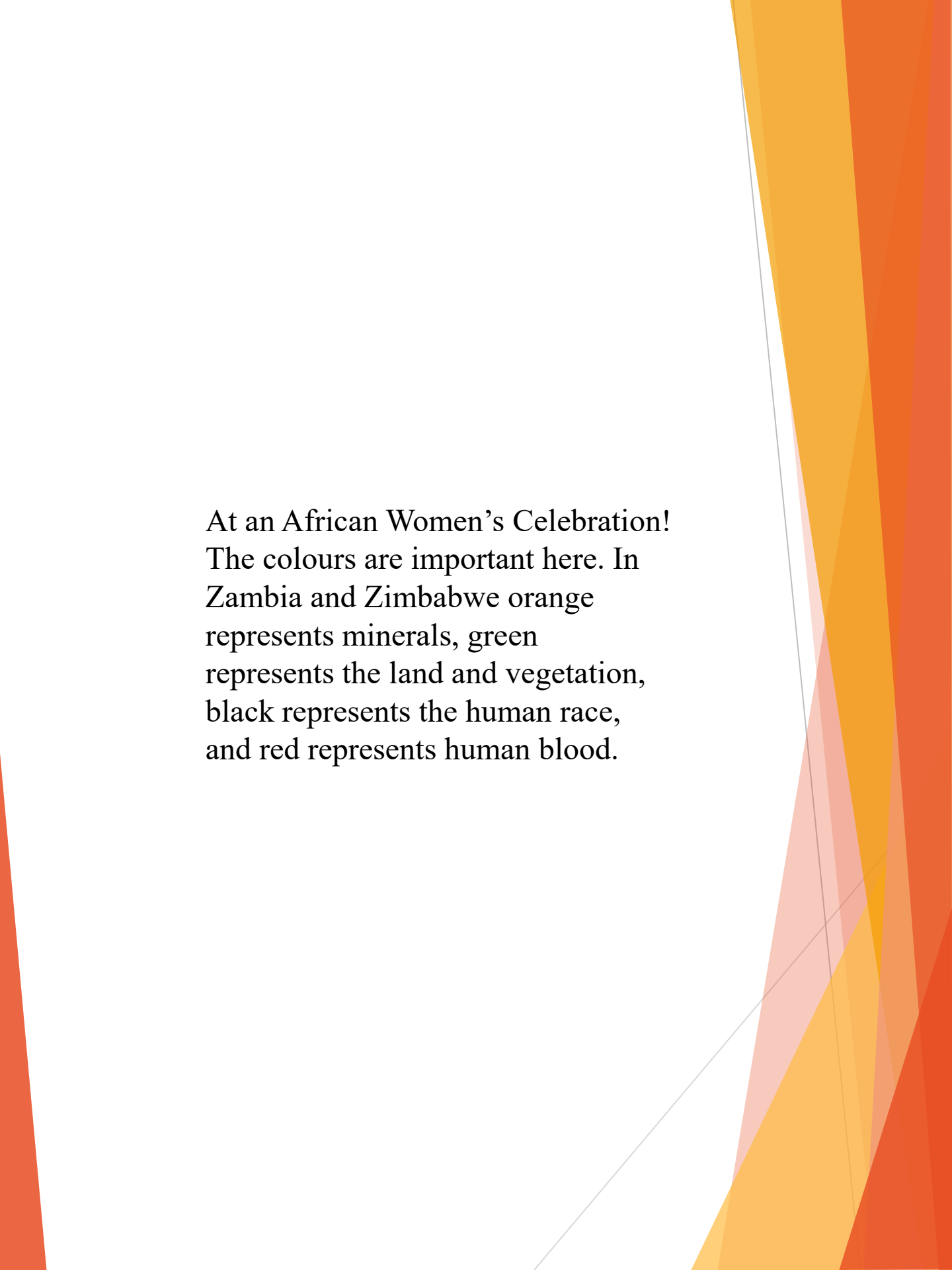
There are three types of Aso-Oke: Sanyan (from raw silk and cotton), Alaari, Etu, and Onjwa.

Alo-Oke is an Aso-Oke. Mostly worn in Yorubaland during important ceremonies such as marriage, religious ceremonies, cultural ceremonies, and entertainment.



This design is called a Gomessi. It is from Uganda and is a cultural dress for the Baganda tribe. We can make it from any textile cloth. This Gomessi belonged to my late mother, and I wear it in memory of her.





At an African Women's Celebration!
The colours are important here. In
Zambia and Zimbabwe orange
represents minerals, green
represents the land and vegetation,
black represents the human race,
and red represents human blood.



This is a traditional Ethiopian made from cotton. It is made from cotton. We wear it as a mark of respect when we make traditional coffee over charcoal for visitors.



A cotton scarf from Ethiopia. The same design is worn one way at weddings and upside down at funerals.



A selection of colourful, patterned summer gowns which are worn by mothers and grandmothers when relaxing.



This elaborate outfit was designed by RRLW member, and dressmaker, Fola under the label of Gold Celebrity Designer and made from Nigerian golden fabrics. This item includes French lace, floral trimmings and golden net, and is secured with a gold zip.

Clothes like these are worn during big ceremonial programmes such as church outings, wedding ceremonies, cultural ceremonies, and other great events.



These are traditional Maasai Community sandals from East Africa. They are made from recycled rubber and original cow hide. They are decorated with multi-coloured beads and bound together using adhesive and strong thread.



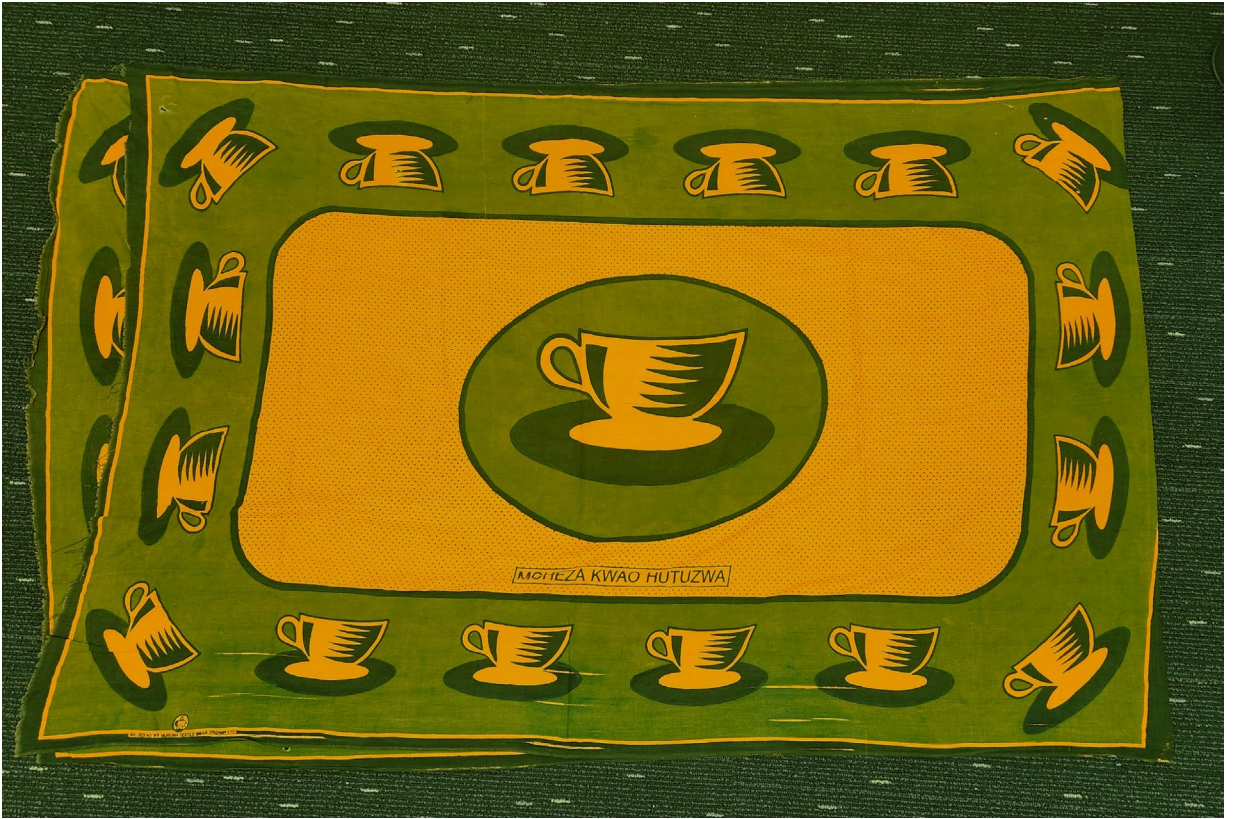
Kente is a textile from Ghana, made from hand-woven strips of silk and cotton.

Historically, the fabric was worn around the neck among the Asante, Akan and Ewe people. According to Asante tradition, it originated from Bonwire in the Ashanti region of Ghana. In modern-day Ghana, the wearing of Kente cloth has become widespread to commemorate special occasions, including graduation ceremonies, and Kente brands led by master weavers are in high demand.

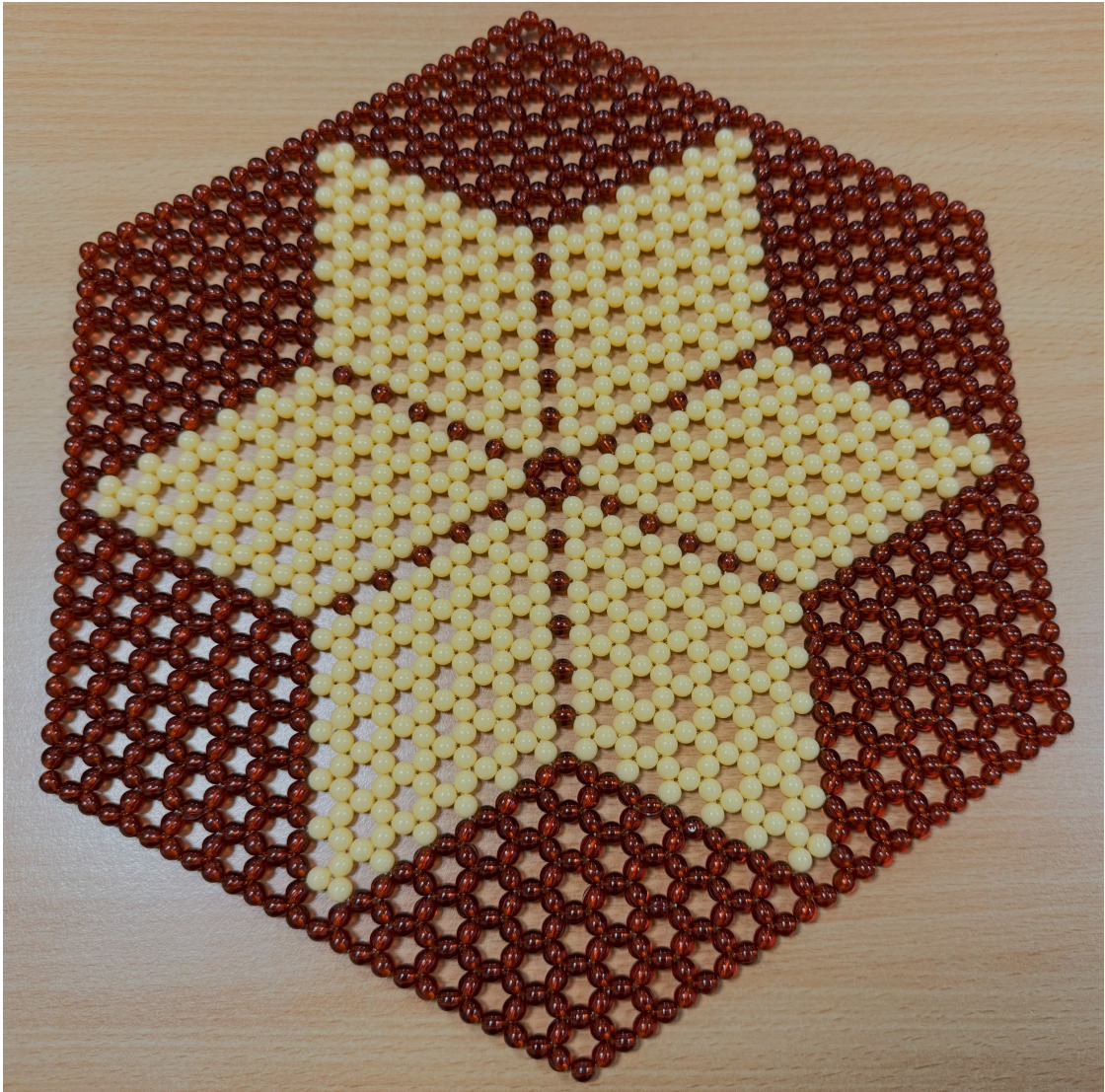
Due to the popularity of Kente cloth patterns, mass-produced prints with Kente patterns have become popular throughout West African and by extension the whole of Africa.



This is an Ankara material common in West Africa. It is used to make summer dresses and also used as wrappers worn by women.



Kanga is traditional Tanzanian cloth which is sold in pairs. They are worn by women, cherished, and passed on down the generations. They are worn as a symbol of sisterhood and unity.



This table mat is made from twine and beads and comes from Uganda. It is used as decoration in living rooms.



This vessel is hand-made in local village communities from sisal which is first painted different colours. The vessel is used by people from the western part of Uganda to serve millet meal to guests. The sisal, along with the vessel's top, keep the food warm.



Igba – Igbalejo is a symbolic vessel used when welcoming important personalities to royal residences, including foreigners, journalists, and investors, and when welcoming in-laws at wedding ceremonies.

To showcase their rich cultural products within a traditional setting, the host would normally place within the vessel, bitter kola, kola, fruit known as “garden eggs”, etc. By eating from the Igba visits give honour to their host.



This basket from Uganda can be used to decorate a living room and can be used as a fruit bowl. It is also used to hold gifts that are given to visitors, also at wedding ceremonies



Traditionally, coral beads were worn exclusively by Yoruba kings, queens, chiefs, and other influential figures, signifying their elevated social status and authority. The wearing of coral beads conveyed power, wealth, and prestige, setting apart the Yoruba rulers from the common people.

Beads are part of the rite of passage during puberty, which is associated with fertility and marriage. This symbolises maturity and the beginning of womanhood. The initiation ceremony held for a young woman is called Dipo, during which beads are worn on the neck, ankles, and waist.

