Asaasa: The Cloth Metaphor for Connectedness

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Abstract: Asaasa is not just a cloth that emerged from an old practice where remnants of fabrics or wax prints are stitched together to create a bigger piece of cloth or a piece quilt, but rather a metaphor for connectedness in life. This piece of work tells a story of migration, inequality, development, diversity, family and community through the Asaasa cloth, using it as a metaphor for connectedness as it emerges from poverty as a result of the various inequalities people face as they move from one country to the other in the Global South. Textiles are used in this article to tease out the idea of connectedness which is part of MIDEQ's aim in the context of migration in the Global South. The piece is representation of how we capture our migration experiences and communicated them through the Asaasa cloth.

What is known as African Wax Print in fact was an indigenous handmade textile which originated from Indonesia and was later perfected and factory produced in some countries such as Holland and United Kingdom in the Global North. The Wax Prints started their journey as an object of migration through returnees from abroad to Africa: these were men who had left the continent to go to war, and had returned to their loved ones. Later they became a commodity for trade, mainly in West Africa during the colonial and slave trade eras. A century later, Wax Print has been claimed, owned, and named by many African countries, particularly West African countries including Ghana as an African Wax Print. This is how the Wax Print from the Global North found its home in some of the countries in the Global South. In adapting the Wax Print into culture, to make it meaningful and acceptable to the society, the Wax Prints were named with proverbs, words cautions and words of advice in the local African languages. In Ghanaian culture and society, cloth is also used as a metaphorical language and expressions. For example, this proverb in Ga, which is one of the many Ghanaian dialects, “Wɔ weku dɔi wɔ mama ni wɔ buɔ” translates as “our family is the cloth we wear”. This means that our siblings, our families are the clothing, the ones who protect us, shield us, adorn us and bring dignity into our lives in times of need. In addition, “kpluka ni baa kɔ bo e edze o mama mlin”, another Ga proverb, translates as “the insect that will bite you is inside your cloth”. These are proverbs and expressions that use cloth as a metaphor, cloth in this instance representing the family and people close to us. This proverb sends a note of caution or a word of advice to whom it concerns to be cautious about the company or the council they keep, because the one who will cause harm will not come from afar but from within. “Sɛ Kuntu hwane a nekyiea na ᵇk₂” is an Akan proverb which translates as “when the blanket slips off the shoulders, it falls backwards”. This is another proverb that uses cloth as a metaphorical expression. The meaning and moral lesson in this proverb is that when one travels, migrates, or moves out of the homestead and life becomes hard and unbearable, one can always return home if it is safe to do so. These are just a few of the many examples that can be found imbedded in our many Ghanaian languages and dialects.

One may ask, what has cloth as a metaphor for connectedness got in relations to South-South Migration and the Migration for Development and Equality (MIDEQ) Hub? To explain
this, I have chosen the Asaasa cloth to stitch up the metaphorical connections between MIDEQ's work on migration, inequality, and development in the Global South. These connections are woven into the fabric of the research model itself; it is in the textile nature of the research structure i.e. the multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary backgrounds of the researchers and research involve the complexities and the multi-dimensional relationships that exist between migration and inequality, and in the interwoven connections that cut across the research partners in the Global South. Cloth, proverbially speaking, is at the very heart of the complex interconnections and relationships that keep the migrant in touch and communion with those they have left behind, as well as those they encounter. Similar connections can be found in the Asaasa cloth too. Asaasa cloth emerged from poverty and inequality in many societies in the Global South many years ago. Asaasa cloth making is an old practice where remnants of fabrics or Wax Prints are stitched together to create a bigger piece of cloth for making cloth or a piece quilt. This process is known in Ghana as Asaasa sewing or stitching together: in other words creating connections.

![Asaasa Connections, image by Naa Densua Tordzro](image)

Imagine the MIDEQ Hub as a very rich, colourful piece of Asaasa cloth, teeming with symbols with names and meanings, each patch of cloth symbolising the global network of partners across the 12 countries (our migration corridors) in the Global South. Each colourful thread used in stitching the patches together represents the Work Packages and the wide range of disciplines that the MIDEQ Hub draws on. Each corridor is working with multiple Work Packages in finding solutions to some of the migration and inequality issues arising across partnering countries, creating this seamless flow between the Work Packages and the migratory corridors. Just as Asaasa cloth reflects the gap between the living standard and the social status of the affluent and the poor in many societies in the Global South, migration has become a powerful representation of global inequality, in terms of commerce, wages, labour market opportunities, politics or lifestyles. It is said that migration of people is good for the survival of humanity: be it for family, economic, or fleeing from conflict and persecution, there is always movement of people from one place to the other for the survival of a religion, culture, or a race of people from ethnic cleansing. For many years, workers and their families moved across borders in search of greener pastures, in the hope of reducing the gap between the poor and the rich. There is a growing belief that migration represents an
important livelihood and diversification strategy for many in the world’s poorest nations, but also in terms of permanent, temporary, and seasonal migrations within poorer countries, a phenomenon of considerable importance across the Global South.

Despite assumptions made about migrants, irrespective of their circumstance and background, most come into the host country with prior experiences from their home countries and are often ready to volunteer their skills in the way of integration and creating social connections in their new society. Migrants travel with their worlds, materially and symbolically. And understanding the place of cloth in this materialisation and symbolism can enrich our understanding in profound and fascinating ways. Migration within the Global South has an important developmental benefit with effects on delivery of the United Nations General Assembly (UN-GA) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It can contribute to positive development outcomes. For example, forming new connections and relationships within the host community often begins with a person looking for one’s own cultural community, such as associations formed by people from their home country. This is very important in building confidence and self-esteem within the host community. In host communities where there are support systems to facilitate integration, migrants and their families may benefit from skills and education, jobs, income and capacity building in ethnic communities. Weaving and stitching through this metaphoric fabric, makes it easier for community connectedness to happen. Developments, investments, and job creation, means more spending on basic needs, access to education and health services and it reduces inequalities. This can only happen by providing opportunities for success and ensuring that the contributions are appreciated. These benefits are mostly felt through the reduction of poverty and income inequalities by creating opportunities for decent jobs and pay. Poverty and income inequalities forced many families to use Asaasa cloth to clothe themselves and the people in their care as this was a common practice among the poor and lower-income earners in so many homes. This act in itself created some form of connection, a bond among the families against a common goal.

Where there are families with children involved, extending a helping hand through those awkward social moments that happen, especially in a new environment, can be avoided through connections and through disrupting inequalities associated with unequal social structures, including those based on gender and age. There is a saying in my culture, “abusua pa sǔm bũ ma ɔman”, that translates as “a good family unit is an important component of the society”. It is also said that family is not only by blood but the people around you, those who connect with you through thick and thin. Connectedness often has its roots in how people connect within their families. Strong familial values are built, and this carries on beyond a family unit to create the stability and sustenance of the society as a whole. In our cultural structures, we believe that family does not just mean blood: family includes those we have brought into our lives and share all the ups and downs with. The supportive action of family can allow a person to experience the care, well-being and the continuity that comes from belonging or being part of a community where support is considered very important. People who migrate with or without their family, without the support system they are used to, sometimes encounter issues that really affect families and the children involve. So, being part of a community with familiar traditions and cultures provides the support and care that has been left behind. In an event of a celebration or a tragedy, the community support provided will naturally impact on family activities such as marriage ceremonies, births, or deaths that occur while away from home. The acceptance into the community and the effect of support gives some
semblance of normality to the ordinary aspect of lives of these migrants. In a community where families with diverse cultural and traditional backgrounds with different cultural and traditional values from different part of the world come together, this creates the Asaasa effect of different textiles stitched together to form one piece. The host community benefit immensely from the diversity and the rich cultures and traditions this migrant brings and share with the community through trade, job creation, learning of new languages from both cultures and community and recreational activities through cultural festivals such as Glasgow Mela.

Diversity is important in every aspect of our lives such as education, work, and our communities and this is reflected in the MIDEQ Hub with its diverse team of multilinguals, of different age ranges working together, and the existence policies that are vocally against discrimination and inequalities. In the MIDEQ Hub, I have witnessed university students from all over the world who are part of this project as PhD students and research assistants (of which I am one), being accepting of all religious practices and traditions that the project partakes in, supporting and encouraging individuals and partners to share their cultures with one another. There are many benefits that come along with diversity, not least the fact that it helps with the growth and development communities. When institutions and societies believe in the power of diversity, it creates change that results in the enrichment of the lives of people it touches in the community. Just like Asaasa: each piece of the Asaasa cloth stitched together has similar representation, an example of diversity in a society where multiculturalism is practiced and lived daily. Asaasa also shows the interconnectedness, the obvious makeup of the people living in the communities, where both small and large cultures exist. Acknowledging, valuing, and respecting each other’s culture differences and that of the host community.

For any society to thrive, it needs inclusion and the growth of the population. It also needs development. This comes with people moving into the community and creating more jobs for the people, migrants getting involved and participating in activities that aim to develop the community as well as general community building activities by the migrant sector. This creates further integration and connectedness between the host community and the migrant communities. As a Ghanaian migrant for example, with a background in textiles, garment making and a traditional music composer, I have, over the years, worked with migrants through the integration networks by setting up creative activities that include educating the people on the importance of the Wax

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1 Mela is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘gathering’ and is used to describe festivals in the Indian subcontinent. The Scottish Mela festivals are multicultural arts festivals that, while having their roots in South Asian culture, can now best be seen as celebrating wide diversity of cultural life in Scotland, featuring dance, music, crafts, food and fashion, not just from South Asia, but from all over the world. There are two annual Mela festivals in Scotland: one in Glasgow and one in Edinburgh.

Glasgow Mela is the highest profile annual multicultural music and dance festival in the west of Scotland. It is now organised by the Scottish Academy of Asian Arts and takes place in Kelvingrove Park in early summer. The Mela was set up in 1990 when Glasgow was European City of Culture and has grown from being an indoor event at Tramway to an outdoor extravaganza. In 2007, the attendance at the one-day festival was estimated at over 50,000 (http://www.glasgowmela.org.uk/pages/history.html).
Prints in the Ghanaian community, teaching some Ghanaian traditional songs and organising and facilitating sewing classes with techniques that are different from what is taught in the fashion institutions. This technique proves to be very popular among the migrant communities. There are numerous examples like this in the various migrant communities, all aimed at contributing to the progress and connecting with the people. This shows that migrant communities are an important part of mainstream society rather than being seen as minor group that drains the community resources. This symbiotic relationship becomes a seamless connectedness among the people in the communities.

We have a Ga saying in our home that we live by and we have transferred that knowledge to our children which says “wɔ anunyam tsa mɛi ko mɛi anunyam nɔ, ni ô anunyam tsa moko anunyam nɔ”. This translates as “our dignity is linked to the dignity of others and your dignity is linked to another person’s dignity.” When you take a close look at the Asaasa cloth, at the colours of the remnants and how they are stitched together, you can see that some of the colours are bold and others are faint. This gives an imagery of a community of diverse people, of race, culture, the rich, poor, the vulnerable and the strong. A person’s sense of belonging within a community is closely linked to their physical and mental well-being, family, relationships, circle of friendships and social network. The recent global event of the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult for physical meetings among people. This has left most isolated from the community, especially the vulnerable and those with no family or friends to call on, and testing the connectedness and the connections that exist in the community. There have been instances where some members of the community have organised themselves to give support and visitation to the vulnerable in the society. This action enriches the lives of people who are likely to be alone a sense of belonging and connectedness they would have missed out on.

There is an Akan proverb in the Ghana that goes “sɛ dua krɔ gye nframa a ebu”. This translates as “when a single tree meets the wind it breaks, but the wind cannot break a forest.” In the same manner as linking of dignity, so are the stitches that join Asaasa expressed in connectedness among people and communities. An incident occurred not long ago during this COVID-19 pandemic in a community in Scotland, where the UK Border Agency had undertaken a dawn raid to detain some asylum seekers in a community, stripping them of their human dignity in the way raid was being carried out. The community became a protective shield: the community believed that the dignity of the asylum seekers was linked to their own, so they formed a cladding around the van preventing them to be taken away. This act of solidarity shown by the community is a metaphorical cloth that covered and spoke back dignity into the bodies of these stressed and humiliated men. If the community had not come out the way they did, these men would have been like the tree against the force of the wind, and they would have been taken away. This scenario demonstrates how connectedness and community support became a shield to protect the vulnerable within the community. So, there is the need to give careful consideration to how organisations operate in our societies regarding the welfare, wellbeing, health and safety of the disadvantaged, underprivileged, the vulnerable and the new migrants settling into the communities. Successful communities strongly believe that when society is filled with hospitality for guests, then connectedness in the community become priority to the health and well-being of its people.
Connectedness happens when people are actively involved with one another, community groups and activities. This helps in promoting health and well-being and reduces stress in individuals. Acknowledging that the sense of identity and feeling that you belong creates the connectedness that exists among individuals, families, good neighbourly relationships, and communities as shown in the Asaasa cloth. Asaasa cloth is not just a metaphoric piece of expression, but also an act of resilience by the poor and underprivileged in the face of numerous layers of inequalities and the political and policy making decisions that affect the living standards of migrants and underprivileged people in the countries and communities where MIDEQ is working across the Global South. The fact that we all come from different backgrounds and places as individuals should not create inequalities in the community but rather be seen as a strength. Our world is a summation of diversity. Wherever one looks, we find people with different beliefs, traditions, ethnic groups, cultures, religion, race and colour. This is what makes our world beautiful and must be celebrated, just as Asaasa is the celebration of difference and tolerance.

This article has drawn out and stitched up the connections between Asaasa cloth and the work of MIDEQ in the Global South. The Asaasa metaphor for connectedness cuts across the MIDEQ Hub. This is seen in the field among the people in the community. Just as Asaasa cloth has evolved and transformed from just a remnant to a rich metaphorical concept that holds and translates knowledge and understanding into the uses of cloth, so too has MIDEQ evolved and transformed into a rich fabric of relationships exploring migration, inequalities, and developmental issues.