Olayombo Raji-Oyelade's Master's Portfolio

Olayombo Raji-Oyelade
orajioy@bgsu.edu

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Final Master’s Portfolio

Olayombo Tejumade Raji-Oyelade
orajioy@bgsu.edu

A Final Portfolio

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Dr. Erin Labbie, First Reader
Dr. Lee Nickoson, Second Reader
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Analytical Narrative

When I began my master’s program at Bowling Green State University, exactly two years ago, my ultimate goal was to gain the skillset to be a literary scholar and an intellectual in my field. As a literary scholar, I believe it is inherent to research works of literature and literary criticism in order to analyze and recreate new forms and perspectives to literary texts. My academic journey at BGSU has fulfilled this and would linger with me for a long time, especially because it was challenging and a reformative procedure I had to go through, in order to be prepared for more graduate and post-graduate work.

I compiled this portfolio to show my ability to think critically about a topic and to knowledgeably discuss the information in-depth. I took this opportunity as a means to expand upon a subject that is most relevant to a specific area that I wish to pursue professionally. While I have done research and written papers on Transnational theory and Migrant literature in relation to African Diaspora studies, an area which I would like to focus on, is African Diasporic Fashion Theory. In simple terms, my unique research addresses the issues of identity and cultural cohesiveness/appropriation on the migrant Afropolitan, using textiles and designs as text. One of the basic considerations of African Studies is the crucial engagement with the issues of comparisons and representations of the African imagination through literary, cultural and artistic objects. How are national identities represented or symbolized in the various modes and designs of textile? Furthermore, how do these processes interface with the representation of the images of the Afropolitan in Diaspora and its dimensions in new media? What is the dialectic significance of dress and dressing as categories of identity and identification? Over time, these are the kind of questions that have stoked my curiosity to plunge further in my research. My research interest is in the discourse of “nation, textile and the Afropolitan” wherein I treat ‘textile’ as literature.
I believe that I am committed to a lifelong learning process and so I have a personal pursuit to always learn, and it is this determination that has brought me to academia. With the compilation of this portfolio and the trajectory of my research thus far, I have carved a niche for myself as an African diaspora scholar and an academic intellectual in discourses surrounding African literature, arts, political and sociological related fields. In the past few months especially, I have gone through a rigorous psychological reevaluation of my writing style, which at first seemed daunting but having to revise the papers for this portfolio has helped me prioritize and appreciate my own thought process.

In section one of this portfolio is my introduction. I discuss the theoretical concepts of Fashion and Afropolitanism which forms the bedrock of my work. This serves as a foundation to discuss the representation of identities through modes of fashion for the 21st century African migrant in subsequent chapters. I discuss style and aesthetics as crucial components of fashion theory while linking it to the idea that African textual materials or arts do not exist in a vacuum, therefore the essence of its utilitarian value and relation to sociological meaning. In this introductory chapter, I also discuss cultural hybridity as a part of Afropolitan fashion to further emphasize the shift and creativity in modern post-colonial fashion trends.

Section two explores a historical overview of Parisian fashion and French fashion houses influence on American fashion. I focus my discussion primarily on Christian Dior and his influence not just to the immediate French fashion culture but also on global fashion.

In section three, I redirect the tone of my discussion back to Afropolitanism to discuss Nigerian-American fashion outputs and their implications. The previous chapter sets the tone for this chapter as I further highlight how Nigerian designers through education and globalization, tapped from Parisian fashion. Likewise, French fashion designers experienced a movement especially in the 21st century to borrow heavily on the African continent and material for inspiration of their works. I discuss the importance of the African wax print in
relation to a general Afrocentric fashion ideology. I then narrow it down to the impact that the versatility of the wax print to the new definition of an Afrocentric fashion. With particular focus to Nigerian and Nigerian-American (such as Deola Sagoe, Lisa Folawiyo, Enna Attah Udemba, Andrea Iyamah, Buki Ade, Nicolette Orji etc) designers and brands, I explore the innovations, the changing roles, and meaning of historical yet contemporary dress with reference to the representation of the Afropolitan identity. This chapter highlights the symbioses of cultural hybridity, cohesion of designs, and the reimagination of identities while speaking of a diasporic identity.

In section four, I discuss the contemporary representations of clothing in fashion by specific Nigerian female designers who have modernized the traditional Aso Oke fabric into contemporary fashion styles, as a way of reconstructing the modern feminine identity.

I conclude this portfolio that the expanding scope of African fashion indicates a new momentum among the African diaspora; the Afropolitans. The national identities I focus on Nigerian and American, are represented in the various modes and designs of dress styles that I analyzed, which further drives home the idea that these mixes and fusion of style and dressing are categories of a hybridized identity.

My biggest take home from this project is how researchable and engaging this familiar topic was for me. The incredible professors I came across within and outside of the department, have afforded me the opportunity to engage with critical texts, viewing them in cultural, theoretical and textual contexts. My specialization in the English department has bolstered my ability to understand texts and methods of critical interpretations across developments in literary criticism. With the help of particular faculty members such as Dr. Lee Nickoson, Dr. Piya Lapinksi, Dr. Kimberly Spallinger and Dr. Erin Labbie, and the resources provided, the English department has assisted in preparing me as I proceed to a doctorate degree.
INTRODUCTION
FASHION THEORY AND AFROPOLITAN IDENTITY: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Fashion as a discourse has attracted scholarly attention since the 19th century. Many studies have projected the economic and sociopolitical significance and theories surrounding its framework, including merchandising and marketing, advertising, semiotics etc. What has been less engaged with in its research is arguably the most interesting element about it - its aesthetics. Marilyn DeLong, in her article “Aesthetics of Dress” discusses the idea that the aesthetics of dress is integral to fashion and contributes to the quality of life. In the classical sense, art is said to be an imitation of life, so artworks attempt to resemble realistic objects, persons, and events accurately, and this imitation evokes an aesthetic and artistic response in society.

Mimesis in the creation of art, a Platonic theoretical concept but of Aristotelian logic as both of them spoke of mimesis as a representation of nature; the imitation of nature in its real form. Leon Golden discusses extensively in his article, “Plato’s Concept of Mimesis” and as described by Plato, that art is not only for "imitation sake" but also the use of symmetry in the search for beauty (118). The philosopher Plato adapted the term to fit his idea that art mimics whom and what we observe in the real world. Therefore, the tragedian, the musician, the painter and the sculptor are all imitators of an imitation of nature. The poet being an imitator, like an artist, must imitate and represent objects in three main modes: things as they were or things as they are, things as they are said or thought to be, and things as they ought to be (120). For Plato, imitation is a copy of reality, that is, all artistic representations are imitations of imitations. In Plato’s argument, art plays a primarily important role in society, especially in the child’s education (at the unconscious or formative stage) crucial for the formation of character and achievement of intellectual power. In current controversies surrounding the functions of artistic imagination, critics have responded to the phrase “art for
“art’s sake” to mean that art which exists within itself; that is formally all ideas of art as “imitation” are abstract expressions from the creative subjectivity of the artist.

John Hayward, in his article, “Mimesis and Symbols in Arts” mentions that Franz Kafka is the perfect modern example of an artist “who seeks to imitate a reality wholly reserved from any classical nature of the real” (93). In Hayward’s article, there is a central argument by Erich Auerbach from a classical theory of imitation to a theological approach:

Here artistic realism involves the audience in impassioned participation in events whose overtones and implications are transcendent. Artistic mimesis under Christian influence records the involvement of all persons, however humble, in a divine drama. The artist, unlike the philosopher, is not an excluded observer aiming at neutral and ramified high levels of abstraction (96).

In this case, mimesis is used to recall experiences vividly rather than abstract or imagined ideas. The image here transcends beyond the visual because this recollection or reliving of experience awakens all the senses. Art is primarily a medium for the representation of reality, which is the essence of imititational creativity and duplicity.

Aestheticians would argue that for a true work of art to be considered relevant, the realistic presentation of its subject matter must be believable. Not all aestheticians and art critics place importance on this since they would argue as formalists or structuralists because the literariness and success of a piece depends on its design, the qualities of its inner composition, and nothing outside of this. The effectiveness of the colors, lines, texture, shape, and forms are cogent because to them, once a piece of art fulfills these qualities, it does not need to look life-like to achieve an overall unity.
Another term for this Western ideology is called autotelic, meaning to be complete in itself, intrinsic, without having any ties to its utilitarian function. In other words, ‘l’art pour l’art,’ meaning that art needs no justification, that it serves no didactic values. Therefore, fashion as an expressive art form is almost always concrete and tangible, and its value is both intrinsic and aesthetic, although it also has the contextual significance of being utilitarian or didactic. Hence, the concept of mimesis and aesthetics are complicit to the commitment of fashion as theory, production, and industry.

Fashion is a popular aesthetic expression of a specific time, people, location, and context. Interestingly, it connotes a distinct expression because of its dynamic and shifting culture since it is traditionally tied to specific seasons and collections. Fashion performs both aesthetic and utilitarian functions by allowing the creation of identities, especially in larger cities where people can "mingle with crowds of strangers and have only fleeting moments to impress them" (Bennett, 97). Beyond the predictable reference only to clothing when the subject of fashion is mentioned, it should be stated that fashion, as concept and practice, has several layers to it. According to Kratz et al in Fashion in the Face of Postmodernity, fashion can be defined as a cultural phenomenon concerned with meanings and symbols, thus becoming an instantaneous mode of direct, visual communication (193). Fashion provides a platform for self and even group expressions, through the display and appropriation of clothes, accessories and other physical accoutrements. Other immediate assumptions can be drawn up about an individual through mere observation of dress to determine which part of the world they may be from, what kind of job they may possess or what their economic position might be. Thus, fashion is about identity, about the self and as described by Roche, it is “the most talkative of social facts” (193), yet one of the visceral modes of identity that speaks without verbally communicating.
Clothing and fashion have undergone several transformations to reflect the change in social, political, religious, and economic modes of communication. Although classic expression of fashion is in clothing, apparel, and dress, its projection essentially relies on the 'style'. In "The Dynamics of Style and Taste Adoption and Diffusion: Contributions From Fashion Theory", Charles King et al. pose that the "fashion is the intersection of style and taste. When a style is preferred or is the taste of a particular social system or group of associated individuals to become discernable, it becomes fashion"_(13). This concept is based on the phenomenon that fashion is that which "has acceptance and is culturally endorsed"..."_is a specific entity, form of expression in a particular behavioral or material phenomenon"..."_is visible and discernable"..."_is fluid and changes over time" and most importantly "has a sociological focus in a particular cultural unit or sub-unit, a social system or a group of related individuals"_(14). Fashion theories are used to explain the reason styles transform and diversify time and space and across cultures. George Simmel’s\(^1\) trickle-down is one developmental mode of fashion theory. It is related to how the socio-economic status of individuals, of higher socio-economic value, sets the trends (in this case, the fashion trend), with those in the lower socio-economic statuses following the trends. For example, someone in the upper echelon or a celebrity would set the trend and then others would follow. The second theory is the trickle-across theory (Charles King). In this theory, fashion trends and styles can spread across any social class since they have no restrictions. The third theory is the trickle-up theory by Hedbidge. This is the reverse of the trickle-down theory and in this theory, trends begin in lower classes and are imitated by the higher class. An example is France in the 1950s, when fashion began as _haute couture_ and then trickled up into accessible high-fashion and later street fashion.

\(^1\)George Simmel's article on Fashion (1904), highlights the roles of both sociological imitation and the need to make distinctions.
What do fashion and clothing say about us? If we wear high-end or low end fashion, what statements do we make? In *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard introduces fashion and clothing to communicate class, gender, sexuality, and social identities. This interdisciplinary work analyses how fashion and clothing have been understood as modern and postmodern phenomena. As it were, postmodern fashion is often applicable to Afrofuturist fashion, historical imagery or mixing materials from other frameworks to form a new "vibe". Today, postmodern fashion could be synonymous to retro, as it revisits the styles from the particular decade, redefines the conventional and reveals multicultural ideas.

Women have had a significant and impeccable impact on the development of fashion in the world. Saisselin’s article “From Baudelaire to Christian Dior: The Poetics of Fashion” talks about the parallelism between femininity and nature: "Woman is nature" (111). The serenity, beauty and tranquility of nature are seen as feminine- in the same pedestal, Wordsworth and P.B. Shelley would praise nature. Baudelaire’s disposition is that Dior adores the female body and likens its tranquility to a “blank canvas” (112); his designs bring the femme fatale to life. To extend Baudelaire’s metaphysics of fashion, Dior sees “woman” as “femme fatale”, a unique creature of nature who is a perfect material for artistic adornment. A simple base for Dior has become a sort of poem of curves, line and volumes². In the same vein, DeLong highlights this when she espouses in her article that “an expression of femininity with fashion may arise from certain colors, textures, lines, and shapes, such as light values and muted hues, curvilinear lines, or small shapes and smooth textures that define the body in a soft and lingering way.” (2)

For Dior, woman is style. Because of these traits that women have, Dior argues that women are the most appropriate sex to express authentic fashion. The metaphysical situation

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of women in the 18th century was that fashion was not wholly ignored, and in fact, dress was an important social phenomenon used as class stratification. In the 18th century France, a woman's style was very peculiar to her status, and the most visible and communicative way a woman could show her style was through the way she dressed. Therefore, fashion being a form of visual art can be used as a social or political symbol, as it can advertise an individual's representation of self and serve as a material critique of society. Dior was particularly special to French fashion and his influence later set the couture manual for many other designers and fashion houses. At the peak of his career in the 1950s, he enjoyed creating pieces for women to emphasize every curve of the female body (aestheticism), but he mostly spoke to the political system at the time (utilitarianism).

In the context of African cultural productions and literature, art cannot function within itself, that is, it cannot exist or have true meaning without reference, whether explicit or implicit, to human situations. African literature views all its text as a veritable means of textualizing and periscoping the realities of its socio-milieu. Aduke Adebayo in *Critical Essays on the Novel in Francophone Africa*, posits that African literature is considered relevant when it mirrors its society (28). Literature is life, the socio milieu replicates the reality of things, and so it is just not a work of imagination aimed to give pleasure. Just like the Aristotelean concept, this would fit his idea that art imitates whom and what we observe in the real world. The aesthetics of fashion involves focus on dress, its patterns and texture, and its combination or interaction with other materials (of fashion), which determines the nature of particular looks at specific period of time and place.

I would therefore argue that fashion is not only for art's sake but that it is utilitarian and expressive of other meanings, perspectives, identities and qualities of the bearer of the fashion item. Speaking of its essentials and materiality, fashion is evidently aesthetic but implicitly utilitarian.
Clothing and Identity: My Orientation on Fashion

My interest in fashion started from the simplistic moments of watching my maternal grandmother control a fabric merchandise in the heart of my hometown; Ibadan, Nigeria, to spending holidays with her, where she was constantly invested in making me cute little dresses with different types of fabric. I grew up attending high-end parties, popularly known as “owambe” with my mother, sisters and aunties. These parties (somewhat like the galas) are grandiose gatherings where the heart of the frivolity is in the cuisine, music and dress; made from native fabrics of *Ankara*³, *Adire*⁴, *Aso Oke*⁵ and lace fabrics into different exquisite styles. Like many Nigerian women and myself our fashion has been a way of establishing and displaying our identity, importance, and social class.

I grew up in a community where festive periods and religious rituals are primary and integral to the culture. For example, the Christmas season, which is unarguably one of the most celebrated season in Nigeria, will serve as an avenue to showcase communal and uniformity in native attires, popularly known as *Aso Ebi*⁶. Families will throw Christmas parties that will last all night long on the eve, go to church to attend the Christmas service and then engage in some celebration on the day. It is a uniform dress made from a chosen fabric that is traditionally worn in Nigeria and some West African cultures as an indicator of cooperation and solidarity during ceremonies and festive periods. The word *aso* in Yoruba means cloth and *ebi* denotes family, so *Aso Ebi* can be described as a family or group dress of uniform design and print usually worn during ceremonies including weddings, naming, funerals, festivals and other

³ *Ankara* commonly known as “African wax prints,” “Holland wax” and “Dutch wax”, is a cotton fabric with vibrant and colorful patterns, primarily associated with the entire African because of its tribal-like patterns and motifs.

⁴ *Adire*, Yoruba: tie and dye textile is the indigo-dyed cloth made in southwestern Nigeria by Yoruba women, using a variety of resist-dyeing techniques.

⁵ *Aso Oke*, a traditional handwoven cotton cloth which originates from the Yoruba people of Nigeria.

⁶ *Aso Ebi*, pronounced “asho eybee.”
anniversaries. The excitement that emanates from purchasing the fabric to getting it designed, sewn by a tailor and the act of group dressing is usually elaborate and colorful.

I began to think more broadly of how fashion for me was desirable to have a layered meaning that just mere aesthetics. The most notable milestone for me in the past year has been my relocation to the United States as a graduate student and the many ways I have manifested my identity both physically and emotionally. A recent example was a soiree event organized to promote diversity and culture where I immediately became the center of attraction since I dressed in an ethnic mix of western and African attire. This incident stoked my curiosity into how integral fashion is to represent one's cultural heritage. This experience coupled with my intellectual curiosity spurred the need to explore the essence of fashion and aesthetics on a larger spectrum. On one hand, it was necessary for me to dress in western clothes, and on the other, it was a crucial fashion statement to infuse hints of my cultural identity in my general outlook. I constantly find myself shifting between both spaces, which leads me to think of the complexities of representing the African diasporic citizen. Upon moving to the United States, I was confronted with the Afropolitan concept of straddling two disparate cultures as I felt the need to immerse myself in the immediate American culture while still holding on to the 'Africanness' that has shaped the greater part of my development. A materialist part of expressing my Africanness involves self-representation through fashion, blending the Western with the African to create a hybrid cultural presence. I have decided to explore and plunge further into the interconnectedness in this materialist culture to appraise this study.

In section one of this portfolio, I discuss the theoretical concepts of Fashion and Afropolitanism which will form the bedrock of my work. This serves as a foundation to discuss the representation of identities through modes of fashion for the 21st century African migrant in subsequent chapters. I discuss style and aesthetics as crucial components of fashion theory while liking it to the idea that African textual materials or arts do not exist in a vacuum,
therefore the essence of its utilitarian value and relation to sociological meaning. In this introductory chapter, I also discuss cultural hybridity as a part of Afropolitan fashion to further emphasize the shift and creativity in modern post-colonial fashion trends.

Section two attempts a historical overview of Parisian fashion and the influence of French fashion houses on American fashion. I focus my discussion primarily on Christian Dior and his influence not just in the immediate French fashion culture but also on global fashion.

In section three, I redirect the tone of my discussion back to Afropolitanism to discuss Nigerian-American fashion. The previous chapter sets the tone for this chapter as I further highlight how Nigerian designers through education and globalization, tapped from Parisian fashion. Likewise, French fashion designers experienced a movement especially in the 21st century to borrow heavily from the African continent and material for inspiration of their works. I discuss the importance of the African wax print in relation to a general African fashion generally. I then narrow the appraisal down to the impact of the versatility of the wax print for the new definition of an Afrocentric fashion. With particular focus on Nigerian and Nigerian-American (such as Deola Sagoe, Lisa Folawiyo, Enna Attah Udemba, Andrea Iyamah, Buki Ade, Nicolette Orji etc.) designers and brands, I explore the innovations, the changing roles, and meaning of historical yet contemporary dress with reference to the representation of the Afropolitan identity. This chapter highlights the symbioses of cultural hybridity, cohesion of designs, and the reimagination of identities while speaking of a diasporic identity.

In section four, I discuss the contemporary representations of clothing in fashion by specific Nigerian female designers who have modernized the traditional Aso Oke fabric into contemporary fashion styles, as a way of reconstructing the modern feminine identity. I conclude this portfolio by noting that there is a rising and steady wave of African fashion among the African diaspora, in the aggregate mass of Afropolitan communities. The national identities I focus on Nigerian and American, are represented in the various modes and designs
of dress styles that I analyzed further drive home the idea that these mixes and fusion of style and dressing are categories of a hybridized identity.
CHAPTER 1: FASHION, AFROPOLITANISM AND THE GLOBAL CITIZEN

Theorists of postcolonialism, including Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, have made significant contributions that help to define the principles of migration literature. Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" notes that the migrant individual is appreciated in the present world and current space, not by his relation to his ethnic origin and cultural traditions, but by "the power of tradition to be re-described through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are in the minority" (Bhabha, 2). Migrant characters are figured by the extent at which they cope with new encounters and places, their challenges, travails, trials and triumphs. The protagonist of the migrant text is always constantly involved in the act of quest and journey in search of self, discovery and realization. Sana Hussein establishes the point in her article “Belonging and Identity Through Literature”7 that the question of identity and belonging is very central to the postcolonial migrant text:

Post-colonial literature offers a strong polemic against the oppression and exploitation of the invading country, concentrating its focus on the fallout of colonization. Due to the usurpation of an indigenous identity by the foreign presence, questions about belonging and identity often surface, all amounting to existential concerns which many diasporic citizens face”.

Thus, the typical migrant is more likely to pose such questions as “What is my new cultural identity?” “What do I identify as?” “How do I manifest and express such identity?” and “How do I forge an identity into my immediate space?”

Anjali Prahbu in "Interrogating Hybridity: Subaltern Agency and Totality in Postcolonial Theory” asserts that the theory of hybridity as a creolization theory is concerned

7 https://journal.themissingslate.com/2013/05/20/belonging-identity-through-literature/
with the current state of diasporic communities in their adopted space, away from their homeland. The concept of hybridity addresses the nature of melding, how the diasporic communities develop themselves without losing their identity whilst preserving differences (76-92). These diasporic communities aspire to connect first with their home countries and secondly with other diasporas like themselves. Transnationalism is integral to the concepts of migration and hybridity because it is concerned with the movement, settlement and transactions of people across nations and countries. There is a shared culture among Afropolitans and others within their adopted space (diasporic citizens), therefore, expressions of this theory as Prabhu defines it, sees diasporic citizens infuse hints of their nationalities in their dressing to cultural retention. Thus, the discourse of diasporic study, transnational theory, and hybridity summarize the essence of this research.

The practice of invention and adaptation is an essential ritual of migration and diaspora discourse, with the potential of assimilation, hybridity and "creolization" of another culture arising from the interaction of new cultures. Citing Moslund S.P, Fatemah Pourjafari et al notes in “Migration Literature: A Theoretical Perspective” that “this distinguishing feature of contemporary migration literature is cultural "hybridity" which manifests itself in the experience of "cultural in-betweenness, processes of intermixture, fusions or doublings of two or more cultures or two or more systems of significations” (686). Borders are also spaces, though ambiguous. This is because perceptions toward them are defined by the individuals who cross them. Borders as spaces and border crossings can produce a high level of anxiety on the one hand, affecting identities and identity formation and creating avenues for the deployment of defense mechanisms like repression. On the other hand, borders can also be interpreted as a utopian place. This further makes recourse to the shifting, the back and forth relationships that exist between man and place, whereby one is seen in the light of the other. This aspect of border also underlines the enforcement of distinct cultures and shows that globalization has not eroded
man's place in defining spaces. This connectivity through borders and border crossings and the hybridized atmosphere that the intersection creates is why the term “third space” becomes efficient in describing the space of hybridizing diverse cultures: spaces in-between where cultures meet without borders and hierarchies; spaces defined by heterogeneity. In other words, the third space is a

"creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a First-space perspective that is focused on the "real" material world and a Second space perspective that interprets this reality through "imagined" representations of spati ality". Therefore, this Third space represents a "purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings (Koxholt, 10).

The concept of identity is perhaps one of the most discussed concepts in the social sciences and humanities. It cuts across conversations on gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality and political conflicts. Our present idea of "identity" is a fairly recent social construct, and a rather complicated one to describe.

Hybridity and syncretism are two key concepts that have raised interests in transnational discussions and have become interesting techniques for people in “third space(s)”8. As long as people continue to move across spaces, regions and zones, this discourse will be relevant. Hybridity and syncretism come into play when there is a fusion of boundaries, spaces, ideologies and identities. People have continued to migrate for one reason or another,

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8 Homi Bhabha’s “third space” refers to the interstices between colliding cultures, a liminal space "which gives rise to something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning."
and as people move across spaces, cross-cultural fusions are inevitable. Culture is dynamic and fashion is trendy. Trends keep changing. A hybrid of two distinct fashions and styles will birth a mixed hybrid product. The syncretism in culture and fashion have brought shifts in conventional dress. Nigerian women at home and in the diaspora - wear pieces like jackets, pants, ponchos, coats, handbags, hats etc, made with Nigerian fabrics and textile. While Nigerian women borrow heavily from American fashion, an example is popular Nigerian-American novelist Chimamanda Adichie is often styled in Nigerian traditional designs with American style aesthetics. American culture also borrows from this idea, as black American artists such as Beyoncé and Rihanna have been photographed in Nigerian designs.

The physical, ideological and psychological pre-conditions that come with being an Afropolitan citizen include the ability to move seemingly between culture and places. The 'duties' include the challenge parochial representations of Africa through vibrant displays of African arts, popular culture and innovations. Afropolitan communities are diasporic communities and spaces; they are potential sites and locations of change, transmission and dynamisms. The Afropolitan theory, a grassroots movement led primarily by young women of color, reflects on shifting landscapes and intercontinental perspectives, with a sense of global citizenship in the twenty-first century. In the words of Eze:

An Afropolitan is that human being on the African continent or of African descent who has realized that her identity can no longer be explained in purist, essentialist, and oppositional terms or by reference only to Africa. Afropolitans claim that they are no longer just X as opposed to Y; rather they are A and B and X. Their realities are already intermixed with the realities of even their erstwhile oppressors. It is not possible to go back to their
native place, since there are all mutts, biologically or
culturally (240).

A simple Google image search for “Afropolitan” reveals pictures of mostly black women wearing African-inspired fashion and accessories. This proves that the visible presence of women and their role in the movement cannot be overlooked, thus acknowledging the primary force of the female in diaspora discourse.

Afropolitanism serves as a structure in Taiye Selasi’s 2005 essay Who is an Afropolitan? The words ‘African’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ were combined to form ‘Afropolitan’. Selasi, cited by Belinda Otas, states that she wrote the essay because of the internal conflict she had. She needed to think about who she was, what she identified as and where she was from or the places that have defined her present self. Selasi began to interrogate the questions she was being asked about her descent, she was unable to answer accurately because she felt she had an "identity that was somewhere in the crack, and unconventional national and cultural hybridity" (38). This curiosity to find a clear cut definition led to the essay ‘Who is an Afropolitan? Selasi states in the essay that Afropolitans are:

The newest generation of African emigrants is coming soon or collected at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethnic, and academic successes, some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss, others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos, Most of us are multilingual… There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen. Then there’s the G8 city or two (or three) that we know
like the backs of our hands. And the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world (para. 3).

It is evident from the quote above that there are several characteristics that Selasi links to being an Afropolitan. She mentions the careers, fashion ethnicity, multilingualism, and the duality of the identity and bonding of the Afropolitan usually with one foot in an African country and the other in an industrialized Western nation.

African fashion tells stories. It tells the story in its textiles, of a people, location and their culture. The exploration of dressing in fashion for the Afropolitan elucidates broad themes, meaning in the in-betweenness, relationship between African and Western worlds, and the strategies that designers and wearer employ to imbue their "art" within the conversation. While my analysis is primarily devoted to discussing how fashion is an integral element of “identity formation” to the Afropolitan, I devote chapters to fashion productions that stretch the limits of the conventional conception of African (Nigerian) and American designs.

My working definition of the Afropolitan fashion style lies in the impetus that the hybridization of style trends and innovations is structured and deliberate.

The Afropolitan idea of ethnic mixes, fusion of dress senses and the hybridization of western and African fashion to create a global statement is what Victoria Rovine espouses in her *African Fashion, Global Styles: Histories, Innovations and Ideas you Can Wear*. Rovine’s central idea is that dressing is an art form expressing the blend of culture. Rovine describes the reimagining and reconstruction of identities in the layering and blending of African and Western fashion styles.

As hybridity of fashion connotes, the result of reciprocal borrowings and contaminations of materials, textiles, fashion designs, sense and taste. A merely descriptive definition of hybridity would be instances of mixture that abound in intercultural relations –
and in this case, a mixing of east and western culture representing the convergence between Nigerian and American fashion. Cultural identity is 'fashioned' through an inter-mixing of disparate or related cultural materials to achieve particular textures of communication, difference, and transformation for the people in the global space. Twenty-first century fashion industry worldwide has seen a shift from fashion as glamour to fashion as a conveyer of identity while still doing the former. As represented and through cultural tapings in Nigerian and American fashion modes, the local can be made global and localized. This mix of ideas and materials as Selasi describes, defines cultural cohesiveness, semiotic communication, and sense of belonging for the transnational migrant, as much as it confers power to the body.

Gladys Akom’s article “Lived Afropolitanism - Beyond the Single Story” points to the idea that Afropolitanism is heavily employed to promote African inspired fashion. Afropolitanism represents “authentic creativity that comes from the motherland” but it is situated in a diasporic context (340). The hybrid culture of fashion proves the visual art representation of fusion between urban Western fashion and the cosmopolitan energy found across African cities. Afropolitanism provides the artist the tools to merge a hybrid mix of influences in a “third space”; a “newness that enters the world”:

To understand the renewed interest in "African" or "Afropolitan" fashion among young people, it is important to situate it within a larger context of Afro-cool aesthetics.

Marleen de Witte describes Afro-cool as the passion to engage with a creative Africa by emphasizing aesthetics in fashion, music and art (285).

At most Africa or black culture-related events that I visited during my fieldwork period, I found myself surrounded by people wearing “African inspired” outfits, natural
hairstyles wrapped around colorful scarves and other fashionable accessories. Additionally, most interlocutors referred to the popularity of Afrobeats in the UK mainstream as part of the trend mentioned earlier. This has contributed to a shift in perception towards Africa: from African roots as a source of shame to a source of pride (340).

The absorption of “new fashion” influences across cultures exemplifies a process that Anthony Appiah terms “contamination”. Like hybridity, contamination enriches cultures, offers cultural change that values transformation. To talk about contamination products, exchange between these spaces highlights the vast diversity of the innovations produced and clothing styles across the continent. The Afrocentric fashion statement of the Afropolitan is one that does not thrive merely on the imitation of Western styles or the showcasing of ethnic or indigenous African wears. It tends to be both cosmopolitan, trendy and authentically innovative, and it always signifies on the multiple ties and spaces that the Afropolitan represents or inhabits. The haute couture by contemporary African designers and African diasporic designers also showcases the African continent as an urban hub of innovation with the female figure at the heart of that urbanity.

The element of making positive Africanness a desirable quality of the self is visible in the Afrocentric fashion brands that blend local and international fabric and hybridize dress styles and designs to create new styles, while catering expressively and appealing to cosmopolitans and diasporic citizens. This “generic Africanness” is “noticeable by a creative, playful incorporation of selected elements of visual languages found in various ethnic traditions –West African wax prints” (Marleen de Witte, 282). In the Afropolitan lives of these subjects
“Africanness [is] self-design” (264), with self-presentation becoming a means of authentication.

An online article titled “Afropolitanism and What To Make African American Cultural Appropriations of African Style”9 mentions that the debate has been made of differing or opposite perspectives “between advocates of heritage preservation and those who defend black style as a way to advance international racial solidarity”, further steering the controversy “within the community of “self-stylers” and “self-designers” of an Afro-centric aesthetic. Some Africans have accused blacks in the United States and elsewhere of deliberately appropriating cultural nuances. This addresses that, as we speak of borrowings, hybridity, and cohesion, there are debates of cultural appropriations by white Americans and black Americans to Afrocentric fashion. However, this piece argues that appropriation of style or fabric should be on the literal level (aesthetic sake) and as a symbol of collective solidarity to the black race.

From time immemorial, clothing has always been a signifier and a medium to negotiate the differences and similarities between cultures. An exploration of fashion across cultures allows a space of convergence and intersection. The possibility of that exploration is that it allows us to understand the nature of change, adaptation, influence and impact of specific fashion styles. As Rovine puts it in “Colonialism’s Clothing: Africa, France, and the Deployment of Fashion”:

An unexpected theme emerges from this exploration of the movements and transformations of garments and styles: the preservation, popularization, and transformation of "traditional" forms of adornment. The centrality of forms associated with tradition in these exchanges might appear to be an

9 https://www.afrosartorialism.net/page/13/?fbclid=IwAR2Agphad5pX7acAbFuyx9Nwu3-o_UFwdi3wA01jyw4owUcmyKPjyVhs8c
ironic circumstance, for fashion and tradition are generally considered to be at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum; one conservative and unchanging, and the other whimsical and transient (44).

The chapters that follow trace the complex networks of influence, creativity (not for mere aesthetics), and its socio-political purpose to explore how Nigerian fashion has metamorphosized into haute couture among Nigerian and Nigerian-American designers and the cultural context of dress practices.
CHAPTER TWO
FRENCH FASHION AND MODERNITY

Introduction

The history of France and the origin of fashion conflate and interconnect with each other. This chapter explores an historical overview of Parisian fashion and the influence of French fashion houses on American fashion. I focus my discussion primarily on Christian Dior and his influence not just in terms of immediate French fashion culture but also on global fashion. From the Sun King (Louis XIV), Worth, Poiret, Chanel, Dior, Saint Laurent to many others, France has experienced a plethora of exquisite designers that have shaped and given a meaning to fashion.

*French Fashion and Modernity: La France, capitale de la mode*\(^{10}\)

In popular culture, French people have been portrayed to be elitist and France, particularly its capital Paris, has been represented to be one of the most magnificent and romantic cities of all times. With art and fashion at the center of its history, it is not surprising the array of people - artisans, historians and creatives – that have been connected to the city.

The city of Paris is central to the history of fashion, and it has been often referred to as the fashion capital. Although the geography of fashion has become more competitive, other cities such as New York, London, Berlin, Tokyo and Milan, also have become remarkable centers of fashion, however what has been spectacular about the concept of Paris fashion is that it is one of the most powerful and long-running reified places in modern history\(^{11}\). When I think of French fashion, brands like Chanel, Dior, Saint Laurent, Hermes, Louis Vuitton come to mind, and in fact the list is extensive and ever-expanding.

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\(^{10}\) *La France, capitale de la mode*. Translation: France is the capital of fashion.

French designers have been acclaimed to be of great influence in the fashion world of brands and labels. The outstanding reputation of the French clothing industry can be traced to the 17th century, and it is a reputation that has only continued to strengthen since. Valerie Steele in her remarkable book *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* gives an insightful history of French fashion into modernism and provides the reason why Paris has been regarded as the capital of fashion:

Recognizing that the position of Paris within today’s global fashion system is the product of a long historical process, this book seeks to explore the evolving significance and symbolism of Paris fashion (2).

In order to understand how Paris became important in global fashion, we need to go back in time to trace the evolution of fashion, even before Paris became its central hub. Scholarship has underlined the complexity of defining “fashion” and Sarah-Grace Heller tries to avoid being specific as to when fashion started in her book *Fashion in Medieval France*, trying to fix a single moment for fashion’s incarnation is to ask when the cultural value placed on novelty becomes prominent, and when the desire for innovation and the capacity for innovation reach a critical point of becoming a constant and organizing people (102).

Perhaps we can trace the first age of fashion to have emerged in Italy around the 14th century, when places like Florence and Venice were the fashion powerhouses. There is a controversy around France or Italy being the capital of fashion and for decades, the battle for the capital has been between Paris and Milan\(^1\)\(^2\). Italian fashion houses are legendary, from Dolce Vita to Prada,

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and Versace to Valentino. The country has been known for its detailed craftsmanship, bright colors and luxury materials, but it was only after World War II that Italy emerged as a fashion destination. In the words of Stefano Tonchi, one of the curators of the exhibition *Bellissima: Italy and High Fashion 1945-1968*:

Before the war, Italian fashion relied heavily on French fashion, and it wasn’t until after the war that Italy’s fashion industry got the confidence and the economic support to come into its own\(^\text{13}\).

During the ’50s and ’60s, French and Italian labels like Christian Dior, Jacques Fath, Prada, and Versace turned their focus fully on couture, and their designers truly understood the need for women to have comfortable, versatile clothing that was also tailored and refined, hence, the coinage and use of the term *haute couture* (fitting clothing to a specific client). Arguably, the French owe their original chic to King Louis XIV, the ‘Sun King’ especially because Louis had particularly lavish taste, which was evident in the way that he dressed and in the magnificent Palace of Versailles\(^\text{14}\). Louis XIV recognized the importance of luxury goods for the economic development, and he invested in the economy which brought a number of industries and trading companies with interests in the arts. The royal court itself became the worldwide arbiter of style, and this propelled *haute couture* to thrive.

When the craft of *haute couture* began to flourish in the 19th century, for merchandise purposes, seamstresses and tailors had to establish their premises in France. Charles Frederick Worth\(^\text{15}\) who journeyed from England to France was credited for launching an *haute*...
couture industry, on Paris’s Rue de la Paix, which set the pace for several other fashion houses including Paul Poiret and Madeleine Vionnet among others.

In Leora Auslander’s book *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France*, the history and gender studies professor concurs that the French people as a nation have for centuries indeed been committed to a keen display of commonly held good taste that could then be translated to the world as French Style. She argues that “In the domain of taste…judgments of aesthetic value emerge from a complex interaction of desires for emulation, distinction and solidarity.” In France, aesthetics was embraced by the head of state and Louis XIV applied it without discrimination to furnishings, jewelry, food, wine and clothing. The Sun King certainly desired France to be known and revered forever as the fashionable epicenter of the world. In her book *The Essence of Style*, French cultural historian Joan DeJean argues that:

Thus, virtually under royal decree, France embarked upon the most extraordinary age of creativity in its history. By the end of the seventeenth century, the two concepts that have ever since been most essential to both the country’s fame and its trade balance had been invented and had immediately become inextricable from France’s national image: haute cuisine and haute couture.

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16 The rue de la Paix is a fashionable shopping street in the center of Paris. Located in the 2nd arrondissement of Paris.


**Haute Couture and Globalization**

Having an *haute couture* dress specially made for you means that the outfit you are wearing is unique, and specifically tailored for you. By its very nature, haute fashion sounds quite elitist, very unlike street fashion since one would almost never see anyone else in the same dress at an event. With *haute couture*, a designer’s vision can be rendered to the specific demands, and of the client. *Haute couture* is a highly protected term under French laws, *De Federation de la Haute Couture et de la mode*\(^{19}\) and can only be used by fashion houses that meet a specific standard. Therefore, not just any designer can call themselves a couture designer.

Poiret (1879-1944)\(^{20}\) is important in the discussion of *haute couture* since he was one of the fantastic designers at the time. Valerie Steele outlines Poiret’s couture as one who brought about emerging trends that many French designers follow and the connoisseur of the illustration period, *Les Robe de Paul Poiret, raconties par Paul Iribe*\(^{21}\) and *Les Choses de Paul Poiret vues par George Lepape*.\(^{22}\) The inspiration of his works lie in his wife Denise Boulet who he married in 1905. As described, “her slender figure perfectly suited his emerging style” (Steele, 201) which meant straight, high waisted sheathe dresses.

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\(^{19}\) The Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode brings together fashion brands to promote French fashion culture and coordinates The Paris Fashion Week. [https://fhcm.paris/en/](https://fhcm.paris/en/)

\(^{20}\) Poiret effectively established the canon of modern dress and developed the blueprint of the modern fashion industry. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/poir/hd_poir.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/poir/hd_poir.htm)

\(^{21}\) Album deluxe consisting of ten plates designed by illustrator Paul Iribe after original fashions created by Paul Poiret (1908).

\(^{22}\) Illustrated by Lepape, this print is one of a series of twelve illustrations for Les Choses de Paul Poiret.
Illustrations of Poiret’s designs by Paul Iribe\textsuperscript{23}

In the history of fashion, the First World War was defined by Poiret’s harem, and the Second World War was defined by Dior’s New Look. The period between the First and Second World Wars is described by British photographer Cecil Beaton as the “golden age of the couturier”\textsuperscript{24}. This is contrary to the belief that the World War I did not liberate women from corsets and long skirts. Of these French couture fashion houses, arguably the most famous till date is Coco Chanel. Chanel deconstructed women’s clothing as it had been known for eradicating the corset trend (a culturally and politically idealistic shape). Instead, she pushed for loose flowing and colorful dresses, known as the “flapper style” which became popular in the 1920s and eventually defined the period.

\textsuperscript{23} Iribe, Paul “Les robes des Paul Poiret”, 1908, https://archive.org/details/lesrobesdepaulpo00irib/page/n3(mode=2up)
Coco Chanel’s flapper style\textsuperscript{25} (photo credit: pinterest.com)

There were male designers too, in the years between the wars, such as Jean Patou but real excitement lay among the regiment of women… The period between the wars was not only an era in which women designers flourished. It was also a time when “women of fashion were at their most powerful - dictators, in a sense of luxurious and capricious way of life (Steele 219, 220).

Fashion and femininity are two concepts that can help understand the origin of modern dress. There is a relationship between a woman’s appearance or outlook and her femininity, which is what designers like Christian Dior, Jean-Paul Gaultier and Yves Saint Laurent focused on. Speaking of the fashion, femininity and even modernity, the western world presents fashion as a worthy pursuit for women, which ultimately draws them into a world of self-imposed rules and regulations based on imitation from the original consumers. The effort to develop an American fashion industry, being a consumerist state, heavily relied on European and Parisian innovations. The individualistic nature of Americans and the demand for clothing by a great number of people intensified the call for originality, but this also gave room for imitation and

replication. Even when the American fashion industry had carved a niche for themselves, many of the designs still portrayed Parisian style aesthetics (women fashioned in taffeta dresses and hats).

By the end of World War II in 1945, fashion trends were forced to take the backseat to more dire international concerns, however by the start of the 1950s, the fashion scene was again at the forefront of American culture. The decade was marked by economic boom and a giant push towards consumerism. The availability and accessibility of several types of fabrics became the norm. During this decade, department stores gained popularity across the country, providing Americans with access to a wide range of consumer goods. When their husbands returned from war, the American women of the 1950s were expected to focus on their role as homemakers. Since women had limited occasions to attend, conformity among them was highly encouraged, eliminating the need for dramatically different styles. During the decade, hemlines dropped significantly, reaching mid-calf or even ankle length while the popularity of the hourglass silhouette rose. Dresses with flowing, bright colored skirts and colorful patterns became the standard for suburban housewives, which was very similar to the Victorian dress style. The new trend was as a result of the scarcity of fabric in the textile market, since majority of the fabrics were being merchandised for the men at war. For working women, a distinctive style was the knee-length pencil skirt which required a tight girdle in order to emphasize the hourglass figure. This was also very similar to the casual dressing, vintage knee-length pleats with a tight waist to emphasize the shape of the woman.

During the 1950s, American women either wore long skirts and high waists, Parisian influenced couture or imitated college girls who wore pants and less cumbersome dresses. Casual wears were made by brands like the Brooks Brothers, Ralph Lauren, Levi Strauss, Nike, Calvin Klein, Kate Spade amongst others, paved the way for a fashion trend that typically defined the average American. Casual outfits became a commonplace because World War II
was also revolutionary and a radical shift for dressing. The war brought about a wave "dress culture" that did not exist before. There was less tension and people approached dressing more liberally. Women wore what they wanted, because it did not matter. A top, a jeans, and some pumps or running shoes makes a complete American.

**Christian Dior and Women’s Fashion at the core of French Fashion**

Dior is a brand rooted in history and cached with luxury. An internationally renowned brand since 1946, the French fashion house has been acclaimed for the elegance and timeless femininity associated with its designs. It is no doubt that Dior's unique look has influenced the world of fashion since its debut. Innovative but traditional, Dior maintains its reputation as creator of recognized *haute couture* and perhaps the one who created awareness for women’s fashion in France, especially with his attention to detail in his bespoke designs. From their ready-to-wear fashion, leather goods, accessories, or footwear, Dior set the pace for modern fashion and created the path for contemporaries to follow. Dior has a systemizing form of development and flow according to the specific age because the idea of fashion is time-bound. Each of Christian Dior’s collections was named after an overall theme and peculiar to each season. Dolores Monet lists the collections per season in an online article titled “Fashion History: The Importance of Christian Dior”

1. 1950s "Oblique" and "Vertical" lines showed narrow skirts that fell to mid-calf and featured a looser bodice with big sleeves.
2. 1951's "Long" line offered a Princess look whose long lines featured high waists and spencer jackets. "Oval" highlighted oval necklines, oval sleeves, and rounded hips.

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3. 1952 introduced the "Sinuous" and "Profile" lines which included shirtwaists and cocktail outfits. Pleated crepe dresses were shown with matching cardigans in sugar almond colors.

4. 1953’s "Tulip" took inspiration from the natural world with large floral prints and a higher hemline.

5. 1954 and 55’s "H" line and 1955's "A" and "Y" lines used letters of the alphabet to describe garment shapes. The "Y" line accentuated broad shoulders and bust that tapered to a narrow skirt. High standing collars completed the look.

6. The "Arrow" line of 1956 featured high waistlines worn with belts and short swing jackets.

7. Dior's last collection, the "Spindle" line surprised all with a loose fit showing no waistline with a relaxed and casual elegance. Called the sack dress by many, the look was continued the following year after his death.

Christian Dior launched his couture house in 1946 and in a post-war context of rationing, he helped women rediscover themselves through elegance and beauty in his pieces. Between 1947 and 1957, Dior revolutionized the conventions of elegance and femininity, designing collections infused with an accurate understanding of the feminine body. It was during this period of the 1950s that Christian Dior launched his “New Look” collection. The Metropolitan Museum of Arts describes the New Look as:

- feature rounded shoulders, a cinched waist, a very full skirt,
- the “New Look” celebrated ultra-femininity and opulence in women's fashion. After years of military and civilian

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27 Dior's “New Look” collection was a repudiation of the styles of the 1920s and 1930s, and it was also clearly indebted to the styles and body-shapers of the late 19th century.
uniforms, sartorial restrictions and shortages, Dior offered not merely a new look, but a new outlook\textsuperscript{28}.

Since women had been moved out of the workplace, Dior’s motif was to pronounce the ‘femme fatale’. The aim of 1950 ‘New Look’ collection was to encourage women to embrace femininity. All the pieces peculiar to the New Look collection portray beauty, feminine clothing, soft rounded shapes and full flowing skirts. A trademark of this collection - was the enhancement of the hourglass physique. An iconic piece that replicated this, was “The Bar Suit”. His intention with this piece was to clamor for femininity, more elegance, and more happiness. With its beige, shantung jacket, suit collar and coat tails, black taffeta cotton skirt and beige straw hat, it is impossible not to notice the precision and accuracy of the hourglass physique.

“The Bar Suit”\textsuperscript{29} (photo credit: Guy Marineau. Courtesy of Christian Dior)

Between 1950 and 1970, Dior’s brand had expanded and by the 1970s, Dior had styled several female American celebrities. During this period, his designs had influenced many American fashion designers. Following his initial collection of the 50s, by the late 70s, Dior

\textsuperscript{28} https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dior/hd_dior.htm

became much more extreme in his designs, he used fabric in excess, especially for his evening designs. He put particular emphasis on the waspy waist by excess layering of materials so as to exaggerate the hourglass curves. He also used in-built padding around the hip and shoulder areas to create the silhouette. One major undying similarity among his collections is the cinched waist and silhouette figure. Dior’s designs ties back to Saisselin’s (1995) article “From Baudelaire to Christian Dior: The Poetics of Fashion”, where Saisselin mentions that fashion for Dior is not just about aesthetics but rather aesthetics has its own function of power and presence. The New Look really did change fashion at the time and its influences are still prominent today.

It is no doubt that Dior was one of the prominent designers who influenced several other global designers like Vera Wang, Vivien Westwood, Alexander McQueen, Betsey Johnson, amongst others. Being the most influential fashion designer of his time, he was so renowned in France that Dior’s name became more of an institution than it being attributed to just one person. Dior’s success in fashion allowed his industry to establish his name across other products, including a bag line, perfumery and cosmetics.

Yet, there were negative reactions to Dior’s New Look from both feminist and cultural economy perspectives. In terms of its economic implication, the high cost of haute couture seemed decadent when Parisians stood in bread lines under the strains of inflation and high cost of livelihood at the time. Designer Coco Chanel remarked that “only a man who never was intimate with a woman could design something that uncomfortable.”

By 1957, Dior offered licensing in 87 countries which offered his label on stockings, clothing, handbags, cosmetics, and perfumes. The brand continued to flourish and by the mid 1950s the house of Dior was a highly respected fashion empire. Dior dressed countless

celebrities including Marlene Dietrich, Ava Gardner and members of the English royal family. These crucial steps that Dior took in his production and marketing concepts revitalized the fashion industry and set his brand on a pedestal of global recognition. Dior is at the core of global and intercultural materialization because he was influential to local, transnational and diasporic fashion as his works explored transformational and hybrid forms. This is an important discussion in this conversation because Dior was first core to French fashion but in later years, based on his influence on other designers, his impact transcended the boundaries of French to Europe, and to continental, transnational and diasporic spaces.

Before his passing in 1957, Dior appointed Yves Saint Laurent who was his protegee in the industry as his successor. Saint Laurent immediately became the creative director of Dior and during the time he spearheaded House of Dior, Saint Laurent created six collections which included the famous Trapeze\(^\text{31}\) dress and the avant-garde Beatnik collection. It was in 2016 that Maria Grazia Chiuri became the Creative Director of the House of Dior, she is the first woman ever to be a leader of the house of fashion. According to Emily Vivian Huang, Chiuri brought a new meaning to what it is to be a woman (in fashion) in the twenty-first century:

To her, femininity is fluid, and she aims to help women express themselves through her designs — for, by her beliefs, fashion is not just about aesthetics; it is also about how you think and feel. In her designs, Chiuri not only celebrates the modern woman, but also comments on the changing social attitudes of the world — through pieces ranging from slogan T-shirts to tailored power suits.\(^\text{32}\)

\(^{31}\) A trapeze dress is something that is tight on the bust and extends freely as it reaches the hemlines.

\(^{32}\) https://synapse.ucsf.edu/articles/2020/12/11/dior-designers-still-wow
**American Fashion for American Women**

French sartorial style influenced that of the United States from its earliest colonial days and continues to do so. Recent research has focused on either the political, cultural or historical themes relating to American fashion. In 2005, Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham edited a volume titled “Twentieth-Century American Fashion”, which argues that America’s culture - as developed in social class, family values and the overwhelmingly influential professional sports and entertainment industry - profoundly helped to create the nation’s fashion industry. The essays in the book focus entirely on the “Americanization” of dress in the twentieth century.

In 2009, Yale University Press, America’s prestigious Fashion Institute of Technology, and fashion curator Patricia Mears published a volume documenting the work of twentieth century American fashion designers while attempting to focus on the balance between technical craftsmanship and the philosophy of beauty of a highly selective group of American fashion designers. American fashion attempts to dispel the notion that “high fashion comes solely from European capitals, predominately Paris. High fashion, however, is not what Louis XIV was after. What Louis hungered for was elegance in all things, otherwise known as couture high style, more or less as a way of life.

Each decade was definitive in style and dressing for American women. In 1920, women wore dresses that were below the knee and were straight yet slightly flowy. Mary Louise Roberts’ “Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women's Fashion in 1920s France” gives an analysis of the shift in fashion because of the social and political climate at the time. In terms of appearance, the societal tension reduced after the First World War and women began to wear shorter and fitted dresses:

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As clothing became commercialized into fashion, it became political in a more subtle and less conscious way than in the revolutionary period. Nevertheless, postwar fashion—the short hair and scandalously abbreviated dresses of the modern woman—acted as a political language of signs (665).

Speaking of the shift in the 1920s, Hollywood was not farfetched when it came to the Parisian New Look. Gilbert Adrian\footnote{Adrian Adolph Greenburg (March 3, 1903 – September 13, 1959), widely known as Adrian, was an American costume designer whose most famous costumes were for the film, The Wizard of Oz.}, American costume designer had a similar disposition with Dior in style (Cinched waisted and protruding hips) but more tailored to suit the realistic environment of America (lesser use of fabric). Although much of Adrian’s costumes and collections were worn by stars, Adrian was originally brought to Hollywood in November 1924 by Rudolf Valentino’s wife to design costumes for the film, The Hooded Falcon.

In the 1960s, women dresses were straight-fitting, often with a white collar. During the time, women began to wear pants as well that were high-waisted and slim-fitted legs. Fashion in the 1960s became progressively more casual across all genders and ages. Womenswear followed three broad trends: a continuation of the previous decade’s ladylike elegance, the youthful styles of Mary Quaint “miniskirt ear” and the Space Age\footnote{In the early 1960s, in the throes of the Space Race between the United States and the Soviet Union, French couture designers like Pierre Cardin, Andre Courrèges, and Paco Rabanne sent so-called “Space Age” fashions down the Paris runways.} influence, and the late 1960s “hippie” style.
In an online article written by Lily Rothman with Time Magazine called “How the Fashion of the 1960 Reflected Social Change”, she foregrounds her analysis on why the 1960s was instrumental in the history of American Fashion:

The rate of changing trends accelerated throughout the 1960s, women who cared about clothes threw off old norms about what was proper – just as much of American society broke loose from restrictions of the past. Though Jackie Kennedy broke new grounds for American fashion, she made way for a series of looser and more revolutionary looks that she herself presented. Art and youth movements made themselves known in the fashion world. Black models and African-inflected clothing inspired and reflected the pride of the civil-rights movement. Feminism was embodied first in miniskirts, which defied the model femininity of the 1950s, and then with clothing designed for women in careers.

Simply because the previous decade was highly dependent of French fashion doctrines, it was almost like the 1950s was the conservative era and the late 1960s was the rebellious era - the period where women were showing more skin and defining femininity on their own terms. Valerie Steele and Anne Fontaine make a similar reference in their 2017 interview with France-Amerique:

*What about “elegance”? Does it have the same meaning in France and in the US?*
Valerie Steele: Saying “American” elegance is problematic; it’s more New York style, which is very polished and varies according to different subgroups. If you think of New York, Upper East Side dressing is not the same as fashion in Chelsea or in Brooklyn. I think the French tend to be more comfortable with doing a simple Parisian chic with a touch of the trends and certain classics like ankle boots or a trench coat.

Anne Fontaine: American elegance is more sophisticated than French elegance. For example, the French don’t like heavy makeup. A French woman would never wear something that shows off her curves or skin. American women, on the other hand, embrace themselves; they aren’t afraid of their body. I really appreciate this; it’s one of the most important things I’ve learned while living in the U.S.

The 1970s to 1990s saw a plethora of granny-style or hippie-style dresses, bell-bottom pants. Tunic tops, graphic t-shirts, high waisted pants, sport wears and casual wears that became a huge closet staple for Americans. People also began to wear casual name-brand designer clothing that were made for Americans, especially since they were easy to throw on.

The 2000s, the “mash-up decade” was when women’s fashion became far more feminine. Although, denim miniskirt, halter tops, low-rise jeans, and capri pants were what everyone was wearing, this century has experienced the most shift because designers began to take inspiration from many different decades to create several mixes of styles.

Dior’s New Look set the tone for many of his later designs and other collections created under his name after his death in 1957. Dior is made for women of all times and colors. American celebrities like Nicole Kidman, Lupita Nyong’o, Julianne Moore, Charlize Theron,
Marion Cotillard have been spotted in his haute couture designs (ball, large and extravagant dresses) but Dior’s team has gone to make pieces that are accessible for casual wears. The team has catered to the category of women who want to appear casual but still chic. In a cursory look at Dior’s website, it is almost impossible to miss the bold slogan that reads “Dresses are everything to me, celebrate the spirit of Dior with a dress that showcases the female form”. This foregrounds Dior’s earlier discussed perception of the female body, that even in his creation of ready-to-wear, the structure and symmetry is constructed to appeal and accentuate the feminine body. From knee length and long dress, short and belted dresses, long and miniskirts, jumpers, jackets and denim, top and t-shirts to swimwear and lingerie, Dior makes sure to cater to women in a way that luxury fashion are made as casual outfits and thus becomes universal and accessible.

Giles Lipovestky’s Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy shows the evolution of fashion from an upper-class privilege, heavily infiltrated by French fashion and how fashion as a vehicle of popular expression in modern day or 21st century has evolved over time. From haute couture to ready-to-wears, French designers have made a huge impact on the international fashion industry, both in the past and present. There is something diffusionist about fashion beginning from the radical influence of Dior to the other modifications that have evolved. There is no single fashion form or trend especially when it comes to Afropolitan outfits, as it is a combination of ideas, textures, style, fabric and texture, therefore it becomes aesthetically eclectic and colorful.

Arguably, to write or talk about fashion from anywhere in the world would mean to include the symbolic influence Parisian fashion has had on global fashion. The transnational process in the exchange of materialist culture is inevitable in the discourse of globalization,

which is why Parisian fashion forms the core of this dialogue. Paris is crucial because many American luxury designers are indebted to French fashion houses and their imagination, and with the exchange of ideas and material between Nigerian and American fashion, it creates a cross-cultural representation and interpretation of material. Christian Dior remains one of the most influential designers to have stood the test of time, which is why a considerable number of designers have used Dior’s productions as standards of representing feminine fashion (silhouette figure; tiny waists and protruding hips). This is crucial to note because Dior revitalized the fashion industry after World War II, especially with the 1947 New Look Collection that positively influenced products by American designers. Not only have contemporary designers tapped from French fashion but interestingly, the Italian fashion designer Maria Grazia Chiuri, who is Dior’s creative director, launched a 2020 collection, which uses mainly African wax print as material for their designs. Here, the 1950 signature designs are repeated (small waist, profound hips, corsets, long-lined dress, excess fabric) in what Grazia Chiuri calls #DiorCruise2020, but this time with detail to the Africanness (the dress, prints and headwrap). According to an article released in the New York Times, it says that “the #DiorCruise2020 collection is a celebration of luxury and value of the African wax print.” What should we then call this, cultural appropriation or cohesiveness?

To further bring this to light, Dior released a video where a Nigerian model Adesuwa speaks to Chiuri on their trip to Cote d’Ivoire about Dior’s intent with African print.

Adesuwa: Why did you choose Africa as your next collection inspiration?

Chiuri: We decide to speak about craftsmanship that goes around the world. I like this idea of objects and techniques travelling. We worked,
especially on this collection, for example with the indigo color. Indigo is a color that is part of the wax print but is also a color that is common with denim and its common with the Dior blue. And another part that I really like is to work with these beads, murine, that come from Venice and moved to Africa that were made into jewelry and also embroidery. What I really like is what we have in common ground with other cultures.

Adesuwa: And you weren’t scared at all to do this in this political climate to try something new like this?

Chiuri: I think that at this moment everybody speaks about cultural appropriation. We also have to explain fashion because this is an argument today that is very important.

Adesuwa: I am an African and I am Nigerian. I personally don’t think that that’s cultural appropriation. I thought it was a very beautiful blend of the western world and the old world coming together to make something beautiful. To unite the bridge between the west and here which is such an interesting conversation these days. But I think that when we do things like this, we are starting a conversation and we are bridging the gap. Now Africa isn’t like this mystical place that nobody knows about and with the exposure of Dior, we can have conversations about prints. Tell us about the wax.

Chiuri: What is so fascinating about the wax is that it comes from outside. It’s indigenous because wherever you come from in Africa, you can come from the Ivory Coast, from Nigeria, from Mali, you will relate to wax print. So it unites people. And what is so amazing with
Maria Grazia Chiuri is that she didn’t use the European one, she wanted to show the quality and talent of the African industries, and to show that there are people who have skills, who can do very luxurious, valuable and quality products.

Adesuwa: And it’s important to focus on the artistry. With events like this, it brings the spotlight to Africa, so when there are artisans there, they get to shine.

Chiuri: I’d like to move the brand in future to have this kind of conversation. I give a Dior code with another point of view, that doesn’t only come from me but from other points of view.

Adesuwa: Do you think that the Dior woman would love this collection?

Chiuri: You have to understand that women live in different parts of the world. I want to see that this code can work for all women around the world. We are a global brand, and it is very important to reflect on what it means to speak about femininity today. It is very complex, and this kind of intellectual conversation helped us to move forward.

Essentially, this argument tilts towards cultural anthropology rather than appropriation as many may presume. With the Cruise 2020 collection for Dior, Maria Grazia Chiuri has come up with a truly African concept. Working hand-in-hand with Ivorian designer PatheO and with women from Morocco’s Atlas mountains, she has launched new wax print fabrics which are manufactured in Abidjan, capital of Cote d’Ivoire. The collection blends curiosity with empathy, and tradition with technology.

In the next chapter, I discuss the influence of Parisian fashion on contemporary African (Nigerian) designs while specifically focusing on Christian Dior’s theory of aesthetics and
engaging with how these designs have set a basis of structure for contemporary Nigerian
designers/labels such as Deola Sagoe, Lisa Folawiyo, TheLadyMaker, TheMuseFactory, Nko
woofficial, Orangecultureng and Lolabaej and Nigerian-American designers Enna Attah
Udamba, Andrea Iyamah, and Mowalola Ogunlesi.
CHAPTER THREE

THE AFROPOLITAN FABRIC: FASHIONING STYLE IN NIGERIAN AND NIGERIAN-AMERICAN DESIGNS

Introduction

How can we speak of an Afro or African fashion without speaking of the fabric that brings its essence to life? African wax prints, also known as Ankara and Dutch wax prints, are omnipresent and common materials for clothing in Africa, especially West Africa. They are industrially produced colorful cotton cloths with batik-inspired printing. African fabrics and prints are worn with pleasure, and it is perhaps every African woman’s pride to wear an African print at an occasion. These fabrics have bright colors, idiosyncratic patterns that are handmade which therefore gives a sense of rich cultural meaning. They form part of a cultural identity and therefore emblematic of the cultural heritage.

African prints play a central role in Afrocentric fashion, but there is more to these compelling designs that meets the eye. First, the most prominent characteristic of the prints is that they are made in bold, intricate designs that give women’s clothing a decidedly Afrocentric vibe and taste. Executed in bright, eye-catching colors or high-contrast black and white, they are sometimes referred to as “ethnic prints” or “tribal prints” but just as there are multiple African cultures, there are multiple types of African prints. With reference to specific designers and labels, this chapter discusses the universality of the African wax print, its appropriation and adaptation into western fashion.

Africa is not a country: African Wax Print as a Universal Expression

African textiles are a major form of expression that Africans use to define themselves. Clothes have been used not only for personal adornment but also as a powerful medium of communication for many centuries. Contemporary African artists are using the medium of textiles to create impressions and expressions of their innovativeness. As materialist texts, they
are also a means of acquiring insight into the social, religious, political and economic complexities of many African cultures and communities the sophistication of which may be lost to general or superficial interpretations.

The continent is vast with numerous ethnic groups and therefore it is not surprising that there are particular types of textile that represent different groups. To name a few, I briefly discuss some of the significant local or localized textiles within the West African sub-region. These include adinkra, adire, aso-oke, bogolanfini, and kente.

Adinkra (ah-deen-krah) cloth is a hand-printed fabric originally made by the Ashanti people of Ghana. Adinkra cloths were made for royalty and people of influence to wear at religious ceremonies because of their aesthetic power and evocative structure and patterns. Reflecting on symmetric patterns in culture with focus on clothing, Patricia S. Moyer, in “Patterns and Symmetry: Reflections of Culture” stated that:

Adinkra cloths have bold shapes and patterns that were often created with carved wooden stamps, resulting in a symmetrical design; that is, both halves of the design were the same. Adinkra means “saying good-bye,” and the cloth was originally worn as funeral apparel (141).

Patterned with traditional symbols, the creation of the adinkra cloth draws extensively from Akan oral literature. Each symbol has its own meaning, as they are linked to stories, proverbs, mythology, songs, as well as everyday expressions of the people. Ghanaians decorate the cloth by using a black dye made of bark. This dye is called “Adinkra aduru”38, and it is what gives the cloth its name. With dye as base, lines are drawn on the cloth to divide it into squares; with symbols carved into calabash gourds, the gourds are then dipped into the dye, and the symbols are stamped onto the fabric. Proverbs are integral to the Ashanti culture, their use being a mark of wisdom and cultural knowledge. The communicative essence of the cloth is conveyed by the dominant colors (red, brown, and black) and specific patterns. In contemporary times, there

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38 Adinkra aduru is the dye used to tint the fabric
are other colors including gold, blue and green *adinkra* formations, with changes and variations in size of patterns, orientation, composition, number of symbols, and the color of the dye. Today, *adinkra* cloth patterns have taken on a more general significance as an important and unique form of African textile artistry\(^3^9\), specifically because of the metaphorical ties the *adinkra* conveys. The motifs on the *adinkra* is ultimately used as a writing system to store their history. Kathryn Sullivan Kruger explains in *Weaving the Word*:

> The relationship between text and textiles is a significant one. Anthropologists have long been intrigued at the way in which cloth embodies the unique ideas of a culture. They can trace the history of a culture through the record of its textile, “reading” cloth like a written text. Indeed, this cloth transmits information about the society which created it in a manner not dissimilar from a written language, except in this case the semiotics of the cloth depends on the choice of the fiber, pattern, dye, as well as its method of production (11).

\(^3^9\) From [www.adireafrican textiles.com](http://www.adireafrican textiles.com)
Adire (Yoruba word which means “tie and dye”) textile is the indigo-dyed cloth made in the southwestern part of Nigeria by Yoruba women, using a variety of dyeing techniques. The rich cultural environment of people from this region has been an impetus to the lustrous visual artistic representation, of which the Adire cloth happens to be one of the most decorative. Margaret Olugbemisola Areo et al. in their article “Origin of and Visual Semiotics in Yoruba Textile of Adire” highlights the historical artistry attributed to arts, particularly the textile art of Adire:

Beginning from the middle of the twentieth century up to the present, the Yoruba people’s contributions to world visual artistic culture have largely been in painting, sculpture, printmaking and textile art. Of all the artistic traditions, the textile art of Adire still remains, perhaps the most decorative. This is due to the fact that the Yoruba are traditionally a deeply religious people. Their thinking is greatly influenced by their history, legends, myths, proverbs, folklores, and deep observations of their natural environment and from all of which most of the traditional decorative symbols have been drawn, and which is reflective on the Adire (22).

The colors for the Adire come from the indigo leaves, fermented and softened with water to make the dye. The cloth (stenciled canvas) while then be dipped into dye and then left to dry and oxidize. The dipping of the cloth into the dye process could be repeated severally to achieve a darker shade. The patterns created with the resist-dyeing technique (stitch-resist, starch-resist and hand painting) are motifs or symbols that convey meaning to both the makers and the
wearers of the cloth. In “Innovation and Conflict: Cloth Dyers and the Interwar Depression in Abeokuta, Nigeria” Judith Byfield explains that *Adire* is produced by a method known as “resist dyeing in which portions of the fabric were covered with paste or raffia thread made from palm fiber in order to resist the penetration of the dye solution” (21).

*Aso Oke* (pronounced ah-shaw-okay) is a hand-woven cloth made by the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria and is a traditional staple for the people. The Yoruba word ‘*Aso Oke*’ is an abbreviation of the full word ‘*Aso ilu oke*’, which translates as ‘clothe of the upper side’ or ‘clothe of the hinterland’. The craft of *Aso Oke* weaving is often kept as a family heirloom and passed down through generations. The production, from the stretching of the cotton to the weaving, dyeing, designing, texturizing and eventually sewing is predominantly handled by women. Cotton is an important raw material and is easily accessible to the people from this region. The Yoruba are renowned and impeccable cloth weavers, a craft that they practice to meet their fashion taste and a variety of needs.

The making of the *Aso Oke* is an interesting sight to see because the fabric is made into different colors as requested by the consumers. Different colors are run and woven together on the weaving machine to create exceptional pieces. Patterns and colors used for *Aso Oke* cloth have specific meanings amongst the Yoruba and are even peculiar to sub-ethnic groups. Ancient Yoruba cloth started with the *Etu, Sanyan and Alaari*, these three were the original and untainted first set of *Aso Oke* made for all Yorubas to wear. The *Etu* is a dark blue-indigo
dyed cloth often with thin light blue stripes. *Etu* means guinea fowl because it resemble the bird’s plumage. *Sanyan* is woven from the beige cotton collected locally from the cocoons of the Anaphe moth. It is a pale brown/beige cloth, commonly worn during weddings and funerals. *Alaari* is woven with either synthetically or locally grown cotton and shining threads, sometimes with perforated patterns.

Of all the types of *Aso Oke* with slight differences here and there, patterns and motifs are integral to their making. In his paper, “Printing Contemporary Handwoven Fabrics (*Aso Oke*) in Southwestern Nigeria” Emmanuel Bankole Ojo notes:

Motifs appearing on Yoruba traditional cloth include the sun, the moon, stars, seeds, combs, and other geometric shapes divided into mathematical grid units to provide an easy method of printing on fabric. The use of lines, curves, and cones complements the geometrical shapes (36).

Bogolanfini or Mud cloth, is a handmade Malian cotton fabric traditionally dyed with fermented mud and one of Africa's most interesting textiles, very similar to *Adire* (see above). Mud cloth is unique and appreciated because it is done by hand from start to finish. Little pieces of handwoven cotton are stitched together into a whole cloth, hand-painted with patterns and
specific symbols using natural dye. The artist paints the background or plain canvas with mud, leaving the unpainted lighter color as the pattern. The lighter color is lightly dyed, and the unpainted areas are treated with a bleaching agent, which turns that area to a brown color. This is an incredibly powerful and significant cloth. Like many African textiles which convey meaning, there are standard patterns that have certain meanings within a specific group of people. For example, with the mud cloth, a circle pattern on the cloth represents the earth and a spiral or twirl motif represents the unending cyclical nature of life.

Originally, in the 12th century Malians used the cloth to attend to basic things that they needed. It had more cultural significance at the time. As cited by Elsje S. Toerien in *Mud cloth from Mali: its making and use* (54):

Mud cloth was used mainly for making hunters' shirts or tunics and women's wraparounds (Polakoff, 1982:144). A woman would wear these cloths during important transitional periods in her life: after excision, prior to the consummation of her marriage, immediately following childbirth, and finally as a burial shroud (Rovine, 1997).
Kente: One of the most colorful textiles used for clothing is Ghanaian kente cloth, made by Asante and Ewe weavers. *Kente* comes from the Ghanaian word “*kenten*” which means basket. It is a thin strip cloth that is cut and woven together like a basket into a larger cloth, almost synonymous to how the Nigerian *Aso Oke* is made. Contemporary modularity of the *kente* have been made and printed into Dutch wax-like materials, although it still retains colors, patterns and symbols. The more traditional and elaborate versions of *kente* were made for paramount rulers, chiefs and titled men, while the modern printed versions have become available for the masses. The act of weaving *kente* is a cultural tradition, the patterns and symbols have distinctive meanings, and in fact the cloth includes adinkra symbols too.
African Dutch Wax Print

“Is wax print, African?” The authenticity of African print has been debatable, with some arguing that the fabric is not from Africa. When international designers are accused of ripping off African designs by using wax prints in their collections, some posed questions on the authenticity of the wax print being an African creation. Renowned anthropologist, Anne Grosfilley in her book *African Wax Print Textile* traces the origin and process of wax print to its West Indian roots. This eye-opening research was an intentional quest for knowledge and is perhaps the first of its kind. The study celebrates the vibrancy of the African wax prints, the variety of African fabric styles, its multiple uses, and explores its interconnections among people and continents.

My first interaction with African wax print, otherwise called *Ankara* in Nigeria, West Africa was during my formative years growing up with stacks of the fabric which my mother and grandmothers possessed, not for merchandising but owned personally. They were beautiful prints with each fabric distinct in pattern and symmetry. I grew up knowing the exquisite importance associated with the fabric, since it was an integral means of identification and a non-verbal one at that. There are bright colors like yellows and reds and oranges and blues and several others tastefully pattern *Ankara* fabrics. I have always been drawn to bright colors and collecting Ankara fabric and having them sewn into beautiful attires satisfies that yearn in me. Even though I like black, white and neutral pastel colors, I feel a certain discontent when the vibrancy of colors is dulled out from *Ankara*, almost a violation to dull out the colors because that is what brings the essence of the fabric to life.
Interestingly, the method of creating wax prints is of Indonesian origin (batik method) and the earliest history of batik dates back to 4th century BC Egypt where it was first used in wrapping mummies (mummification process). Technically, the first motifs of batik started in Africa before it was developed in Java, Indonesia as a method of craftsmanship on textile. It was the West African mercenaries working in Indonesia, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and over four decades (1831-1872) that brought the technique back with them to Africa. Inger McCabe Elliot’s book *Batik: Fabled Cloth of Java* gives a historical analysis of batik, discusses the controversy around the first people who began to use wax and traces it in a chronological order to be the earliest work of the Javanese people:

> The word batik does not belong to the old Javanese; and in fact its origin is not clear. Most likely batik is related to word titik, which in modern Indonesia and Malaysia refers to dot, point or drop….Whatever its origin is, the designs and uses of Javanese batik have reflected the vicissitude of Java’s ever-changing society (2013, p.2).

Elliot further highlights that the batik textile art began in Indonesia where wax is melted and meticulously applied to the canvas (cloth) by hand, which is then soaked in dye to create a pattern. This wax-and-soak process is repeated multiple times, creating multi-colored patterns of floral, animal motifs and geometrics on cloth. It was in the nineteenth century when the Dutch
enlisted African men to the war that the mercenaries took interest in the art and returned with the knowledge back to Africa. By the end of the 19th century, the Indonesians flooded the market with cheaper and printed (machine-made) versions of the cloth since the hand-made versions were expensive, time-consuming and labor-intensive. Although the printed versions were faster to produce, they were a few glitches. The printed version materials had gaps, dots, streak of lines when the machine was faulty, and this did not appeal to the Indonesian market and so they turned to Africa to merchandise. The African market appreciated the imperfection and in fact Dutch wax manufacturers still program their machines with these imperfections longer after the machines process the designs perfectly.

With the reception of this cloth, African taste began to shape the evolving designs. Bright colored wax print, patterns and geometry, saying and proverbs were in high demand from both rich and poor. West African traders began to give names to the wax prints per design. One famous one was ‘You fly, I fly’ which showcases a bird escaping from its cage.

*You fly, I fly Ankara (Source: Pinterest)*
In the 2012 online article entitled “The Curious History of Tribal Prints”\(^{41}\) Julia Felsenthal quotes Jessica Helbach, a Dutch curator whose art studio has worked closely with Vlisco,\(^{42}\) notes that “naming the fabrics either by what they look, what they are for, or by giving them indigenous names, is a way of attributing ties with the foreign-made cloth”.

Different cultures developed their own variations of wax printing and the advancement in technology has made the printed textile even more accessible. The huge success of the Dutch wax print prompted other players in the market to imitate. Vlisco manufacturers are the most popular of the Dutch wax print, ABC wax print manufacturers was founded by two British brothers and there is the China or Asia wax print which is the most inferior version of the types of wax prints. The demand however for authentic Dutch wax print for West Africans is insatiable which proves why the European manufacturers set up wax print factories in Africa, an example is Vlisco who own West African subsidiaries, such as Woodin, Uniwax and Ghana Textile Printing Company Ltd.

\(^{41}\)“The Curious History of Tribal Prints”. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/design/2012/03/african_fabric_where_do_tribal_prints_really_come_from_.html

\(^{42}\) Vlisco is one of the leading manufacturers of Dutch wax textile prints.
Of all the several textiles and prints that the African continent is replete with, the African wax print is perhaps the most popularized, possibly because of the wide range of designs the artists are able to express with it and even because of the texture the fabric has. The Ankara is weather-friendly, is a 100% cotton material and so it appears soft and when sewn it glides smartly on the body.

I parallel the textile on the same pedestal with the English language and its acceptance in West Africa. While several languages, dialects and variants of indigenous language are spoken, English language is the universal and collective mode of verbal expression that connects all these regions together. In the same vein, Ankara carries the same weight of the linguistic analogy. Thus, kente and Andikra are attributed to the Ghanaian people, Adire and Aso Oke to the Yoruba people of Nigeria, and Bogolanfini for the Malian people. Ankara or African wax print is a fabric that depicts that collective uniformity of textile use amongst Africans. Ghanaian fashion designer Belinda Compaah-Keyeke said in her CNN interview “The Complex Future of African Fabric (which isn’t African)” that African print is the first point of contact to their culture as Africans. “When we are born, we are wrapped in a wax print. It is a major part of every African's heritage, and every wax print tells a unique African story.” Ankara has indoctrinated itself as part of African culture and history, such that it is almost impossible not to regard the fabric as a cultural symbol. When you ask Africans of the history of Ankara, you will hear stories of ancestral heritage attached to the fabric.

In Africa, as much as clothes are used to cover up and decorate the body, the body is equally adorned with painting, tattooing and jewelry. What is unique to Africans, specifically, Nigerians is their traditional fabrics and their conventional style - the Adire and Ankara of the Yoruba people, the Ogodo of the Igbo people and the Abaya of the Hausas. Dwellers in Nigeria can distinguish the Eastern way of dressing from that of the Northern or Western as each ethnic group has its textile identifier, its tangible cultural signifier. Traditional clothing hardly ever
changes. If any change occurs, it is only in very little details, and this can be very rare. It is the influx of Westernization and the mimicry of Euro-American and other foreign cultures that alters conventional designs. In Afrocentric fashion circles, *Ankara* prints are frequently used to create caftans, free-flowing dresses and more. Traditional African fabric such as *Ankara* or wax prints, are most well known for their use in dresses, shirts and head wraps. However, there is so much more that can be done with African cloth. All it takes is a little creativity, through a combination of beautiful African style with modern pieces for a fun look.

Specifically, in Nigerian fashion, the 1970s was a defining period for an African fashion. This period was particularly boisterous for the Nigerian fashion industry as the military rule of the time, led by General Olusegun Obasanjo, imposed a ban on the importation of ready-made clothes. The ban gave rise to the creation of home-made brands rather than the importation of ready-to-wears. Prior to this, the Nigerian market had been taken over with the importation of English ready-to-wears from England. With the dire aim of preserving the pristine Nigerian culture, the ban was placed on these importations. By the early 2000s, many designers had migrated from Nigeria to find greener pastures and establish themselves in other Western countries. Prominent in this period, was Deola Sagoe. Returning from fashion school in London and New York, and since then, her brand has remained one of the most respected fashion labels in Nigeria. Known for her attention to detail and peculiar design aesthetic, Sagoe has consistently been a notable yardstick in exploring the business of fashion in Lagos, the central hub of Nigeria. Her many mixes of Nigerian and Western designs, saw her using the traditional fabric markers of her Yoruba heritage to make western pieces. She is in fact, popularly known to have remodeled the traditional “*iro and buba*” into what she calls “Sagoe”, sourcing for other fabrics from Italy and the United States. It has become one of the most sought-after ceremonial attires for many Nigerians. This hybridity was a trend in fashion, as it was to promote the cultural heritage of both parties. This took fashion in Nigeria beyond the
walls of a regular tailor to the hands of creative fashion designers who had witnessed global exposure.

(Rihanna, Solange Knowles and Lydia Hearts in Deola Sagoe Collection. Source: Pinterest)

This hybridity was a trend in fashion, it was to promote the cultural heritage of both parties. This took fashion in Nigeria beyond the walls of a regular tailor to the hands of creative fashion designers who had witnessed global exposure. Nigerian and even African fabrics were seamed with western wools and cotton to make outstanding pieces. Nigerian designers like Ejiro Amos Tafiri, Lisa Folawiyo and Lanre DaSilva Ajayi were known for using traditional Nigerian fabric and design skills to create contemporary pieces which were authentically Nigerian but could compete with designs on any global platform.

In 2007, when the Africa Arise Fashion Week arrived in Lagos, Nigeria’s metropolis, things started changing for the industry. It was on this stage that America’s model Naomi Campbell walked on in Deola Sagoe’s designs six years after, remarkable pieces she designed using the traditional Aso Oke fabric. It was more than a supermodel appearance. It called for international recognition in Nigeria. Since 2016, the GTBank Fashion Weekend has been at the forefront of promoting enterprise in Africa's rapidly growing fashion industry. In the past three years, the event which is held in Lagos, Nigeria, has brought together renowned fashion experts
and personalities, starring fashion celebrities like America’s Jay Alexander, Sudan’s Grace Bol and London’s Ozwald Boateng.

Second to none is Nigerian designer Lisa Folawiyo. Her intricate, embellished designs have extended far beyond the home country, Nigeria. Her pieces from her eponymous label have appeared on the likes of Lupita Nyong’o, Thandie Newton and Solange Knowles. Folawiyo is known for her creativity with Ankara, her vibrant cultural heritage is reflective in her modernist expression. After studying her pieces, I conclude that Folawiyo is an enigmatic designer who has everything “Africa” in her palms but brings the American casual feel into her expressions. Is there an African casual wear? I do not think so. Without neglecting her boubous, long skirts, let’s think of leggings, turtlenecks, tops, Folawiyo executes her Afrocentric standpoint beautifully.
Lisa Folawiyo is an interesting one, as she incredibly creates something wholly unique with her innovative use of African fabric. Folawiyo has an incredible way of making her collections feel so experimental and familiar all at the same time. Brands like Ejiro Amos Tafiri, TheLadyMaker, TheMuseFactory, Nkowoofficial, OrangeCultureng and Lolabaej are local Nigerian fashion houses who are all unique in their own way but have a collective motive of making Afrocentric inspired pieces for the contemporary Nigerian woman. The developing syncretic western-African style collections have experienced a blend not only in fabric but also in how the female body is represented. The conceptualization of dressing in the Yoruba culture is attached to the *Omoluabi* philosophy that a Yoruba person must always dress well and have moral standards, which is a yet another disposition that propels Dior’s designs and other Parisian designs. Parisians are elitist, selective, and of high taste and aesthetic choices. House of Dior’s disposition on this has been unshaking from its inception, its aim is to make women feel chic, feminine, beautiful, classy and be luxurious, a very similar tenet of the Afropolitan feminine fashion. I bring the aforementioned brands into this discussion because I noticed that they have all styled renowned Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Adichie. While we do not usually think of writers as fashion icons, to represent where she is from, Adichie’s Afrocentric elegance, grace, and exquisite taste helped her earn that distinction. On rare occasions when she does not wear Nigerian clothing (like at the recent Glamour Women of the Year Awards, where she wore Dior to honor Chiuri), she incorporates Nigerian-made accessories. Adichie is a lover of Africa, of Nigeria and represents it in writing and in dressing.
Contemporariness in globalization has seen Nigerian fashion transition from the conventional to the radical and experimental. There is a libertarian response to the traditional notion that the African feminine body is sacred, and therefore should not be exposed. The developing syncretic western-African style collections have experienced a blend not only in fabric but also in how the female body is represented. Twenty-first century Nigerian designs have been able to put this in consideration, where fashion staples such as Dior’s hourglass silhouette, Marilyn Monroe’s halter neck, Chanel’s female power suite or even Mary Quant’s mini skirt have been indoctrinated. These borrowings have created a new wave of fashion amongst Nigerian women.
Styled by Enna Attah Udembas whose brand is called *Enagancio*, Beyonce made a jaw-dropping appearance at Artist Space exhibition, wearing an *Ankara* suit complemented with an elaborate hat that screamed an Afrocentric look which was a creative replica of Coco Chanel’s power suit.

*BEYONCE IN ENAGANCIO (Photo credit Alex J. Berliner/ABImages)*  
*POWER SUIT BY COCO CHANEL (Photo credit Getty Images)*

Before her global recognition for styling the international star, Udembas had been popular for her recreation of Dior’s New Look. She executed this look with Dior’s precision to detail but has only tweaked it by using Ankara to recreate the entire dress. Udema prides herself as a Nigerian-American and extends this in her pieces by making traditional African prints in modern-inspired silhouettes.
African Diasporic Fashion As Afropolitan

The Afropolitan is defined by his or her routes through Africa and the physical or ideological conditions that come with being an Afropolitan, which includes the ability to move seemingly between culture and places. The ‘duties’ include the challenge parochial representations of Africa through vibrant displays of African arts, popular culture and innovations, and of such, the discussion of the African wax print falls in this context. Although popularized by Nigerians, the universality of the Ankara also serves a collective non-verbal mode of expression and recognition across African diasporic citizens, irrespective of what part of Africa they are from.

An Afropolitan is that person of African descent who has realized that their identity can no longer be explained in purist, essentialist, and oppositional terms or by reference only to Africa, therefore seeks to find tangible and textual modes of visual representation.

The Afropolitan idea of ethnic mixes, fusion of dress senses and the hybridization of western and African fashion to create a global statement is what Taiye Selasi expresses in her “Bye Bye Babar” essay, and what Victoria Rovine espouses in her *African Fashion, Global Styles: Histories, Innovations and Ideas you Can Wear*. Rovine’s central idea is that dressing is an art
form of expressing the blend of culture. Rovine describes the reimagination and reconstructing of identities in the layering and blending of African and Western fashion styles.

In this case, Ankara has journeyed from Africa into the spheres of the Western world and infiltrated the artistic curiosity of designers. With globalization and transnationalism as tenets that describe the shift and displacement which create the Afropolitan, it is however not surprising how there is an enigmatic African diasporic fashion. In this chapter, I discuss Ankara as a universal non-verbal encoder and decoder with the African continent that categorically ties indigenes of various ethnic groups together. If we look at this broadly as I am propelled to, I think that the African wax print is “universal” in the sense that it not only functions within the space of its origin but is a fabric that the entire black community can identify with. African Americans associate the African print clothing with expressions of Black pride, based on its popularity during the civil rights movement and its use in the Black Power movement as a way to show solidarity and connection with one’s African heritage. They see the fashion not as a way to spread African culture, but to reclaim it.

In a 2020 New York Times publication titled “While Customers, Black Fabric” written by Shira Telushkin, she focuses on Nigerian-born American fashion designer Nicolette Orji, also known as Nikki Billie Jean, the founder of “All Things Ankara” who notes that “African-born designers see African print as a way to spread their culture”. Orji has stood out for her incredible innovation in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak to creating face masks with Ankara prints. Orji falls under the diasporic citizens who make sure to bring the indigenous fabric wherever they go, and this is essentially what defines the Afropolitan.
Just when I was done viewing Orji’s Instagram profile, I found another Nigerian American fashion designer’s profile, Buki Ade. Buki Ade established *Bfyne* a swimwear company known for its innovative use of straps, sleeves and prints drawn from her Nigerian heritage. Now before the importation of ready-made clothes to Nigeria (of which I take a wild guess that swimsuits were possibly a part of), I do not recall that Nigerians had a special swimming outfit, other than a small piece of cloth to cover the genitalia. Ade brands her pieces in such a way that reflects the African heritage without having to speak. It screams Africa from the swimsuits, scarves and to the mesh-like overalls.
Similar to Buki Ade is Andre Iyamah’s tropical Afro-cool swimwear collection. Iyamah’s career in fashion designing started when she left the shores of Nigeria and moved to the United States. Iyamah’s clothing brand is interesting to see in the way that she creates robes and free-flowing gowns which are similar to the West African boubou43, wide pants, swimwear, resort clothing and accessories. Iyamah creates an exciting replica of many African inspired fashion but in a way that commands the curiosity of both consumers and target audience. With chiffon and silk materials which automatically screams summer or tropical vibe, Iyamah takes a creative step in adding African prints to them. She infuses her designs with prints that are similar to Adire of the Yoruba people, Bogolanfini of the Malian people and streaks of Adinkra and Kente.

43 The boubou is the classic Senegalese robe, worn by both men and women all over West Africa and in West African diasporic communities of Europe and the United States.
Patterns and motifs have been a way to communicate without saying a word (semiotics), and it can be unpleasant for some to see these designs worn without any regard to their original messages. Some of the cloths used now for shorts, halter dresses and jumpsuits holds specific meaning in Nigeria or Ghana for example, where it may signal that one is pregnant, newly married or mourning a relative. While the argument of my paper tilts towards cultural cohesion and the innovative spirit of the Afropolitan, I will want to note the ambivalence that hybridization might also pose in that Afropolitans tend to wear culturally significant garments (like those for religious ceremonies) as if they are everyday clothing. This is a result of the syncretic order which divests cultural artefacts from specific ethnic African space and original meaning. This is reminiscent of what happened to the traditional African religions and other traditions like naming and naming ceremonies, dance forms and food types which underwent re-adaptations and syncretism as a crucial part of hybridization.

Still on the online publication “While Customers, Black Fabric”44, Telushkin notes that Scot Brown, a professor at University of California, Los Angeles and a historian of African-American social movements and popular culture, mentions that it is positive that the Ankara print will not lose its significance for the African-American community if it goes mainstream.

He sees the innovative use of African print for Western business clothes as a sign that African fashion is not static, it will constantly evolve and adapt to changing conditions as they arise:

When something goes mainstream, there is always some new underground thing happening, and that the expressions of Black pride will simply evolve and take up new forms.

African style is such a vast, almost infinite body of creativity that you don’t ever have to worry about running out of creative gas.

The African print is globally accepted and is being used in so many creative ways by top designers and fashion houses. American celebrities have also caught the buzz and amidst recent dialogues in the United States around race, ethnicity and culture, the concept of cultural appropriation often pops up in relation to African prints, among other distinct fashion from specific regions or countries, therefore it is not surprising that many American celebrities have been spotted in designs made from this fabric. I think there is a cultural shift among designers using these prints; they have gone more contemporary, making it more accessible. At work, someone might wear a white Calvin Klein dress with an African print jacket over it. There are sleeveless dresses to the knee, a print jacket you can wear with ripped jeans, it is all very playful and aesthetically pleasing.

To accurately articulate, Afropolitan fashion is heavily employed to promote the African cyclical and undying heritage. Afropolitanism represents “authentic creativity that comes from the motherland” but is situated in a diasporic context because there is the need to refer to home whilst carving or reshaping the “new” identity. The hybrid culture of fashion proves the visual art representation of fusion between urban Western fashion and the cosmopolitan energy found across Africa. Afropolitanism provides the artist the tools to merge a hybrid mix of influences in a “third space”. In order to understand the renewed interest in
“African” or “Afropolitan” fashion among young people, it is important to situate it within a larger context of Afro-cool or retro aesthetics.

The 2000s “mash-up decade” of American fashion where denims, halter tops, mini-skirts and dresses, high-waisted and low-rise jeans, dungarees have been going in and out of style, are some of the pieces Afropolitans perch on as spectacle to create an interesting fusion of ethnic mixes. On the flip side, western fashion houses are in lieu of tapping heavily from the African continent in terms of artistry.

As I discussed in the previous chapter that it will be unacceptable to speak of a global fashion by excluding the role(s) Parisian fashion has played, I further situate that discussion within Afropolitan fashion. In Paris where the Wax has become the emblem of a new generation of Afropolitans that is, Afro-descendants resulting from interbreeding between African and Western cultures, who now embrace all aspects of their legacy, including this famous African/Dutch Wax.

Afro descendants who rather than wait for fashion to go their way, now create their own clothes. The fashion house, “Maison Chateau Rouge” named after a Parisian district well-known to African communities, has recently collaborated with Monoprix, a large French store chain, for the creation of a collection of clothes and American brand, Nike, for a collection of shoes. In an online conversation with Courier⁴⁵ (a French digital newspaper), the Senegalese-French founder of “Maison Chateau Rouge” Youssouf Fofana mentions that opening his shop in the predominantly African neighbourhood in Paris and borrowing its name for his label is about social initiative, shifting the conversation and shining a spotlight on his heritage and community:

“It was imperative that we put the shop in Château Rouge.

What’s important for me is authenticity, and telling a story

⁴⁵ https://mailchimp.com/courier/article/maison-chateau-rouge/
that’s true,’ says Youssouf. ‘The name is a bit comic, because we’re in Paris – the capital of fashion! Yet we’ve put together ‘maison’ – which traditionally refers to Chanel, Dior and so forth – and Château Rouge – the working-class African neighbourhood. And it’s worked a charm, because it’s very recognizable: every Parisian knows Château Rouge. People don’t come here just to buy a product – you can do that online. Instead, they want to immerse themselves into a world, and our advantage is that the neighbourhood is an extension of our brand”.

Fofana’s standpoint with his brand posits that creating an atmosphere that accurately depicts the element of making positive Africanness a desirable quality is visible in the choice to blend local and international styles, catering expressly to a cosmopolitan public of affluent Africans living abroad, especially in a city that is tagged as the fashion capital. With fabric sourced from sub-Saharan West Africa, Fofana designed and created everything in the Maison Château Rouge collection, which is popular among young Parisians, from cushions, backpacks and T-shirts to Air Jordan’s from a recent Nike collaboration. The kaleidoscopic patterns paired with a strong streetwear influence give an Afropolitan cool aesthetic.
Fafona’s idea of deliberately infusing Afro aesthetics into his work is made evident in his partnership with Nike. The different patchwork colors on the Nike Air Jordan I shoes symbolize the meeting of various cultures as they represent the richness and cultural diversity found in Africa and found in the Château Rouge neighborhood as a means of connecting heritage with modernity and creating an Afro-retro vibe.

“So I kept the blue and added some brown, which represents Africa for me. I then added touches of yellow, which is the color of the Maison Chateau Rouge brand. Finally, I replaced white with ecru for an element of softness. There are also small red details and visible seams. These are a way for me to pay tribute to the expertise of both African artisans and Parisian couturiers. We created inlaid and embossed designs for the AJI, because I wanted to add a modern touch, rather than simply applying prints. The inlaid designs reference scarification. In Africa, scarification is a way of expressing identity, belonging to a community, passing into adulthood or connecting to a spiritual group”.

(Photos retrieved form www.maisonchateaurouge.com)
For fashion designers, inspiration can emerge from a wide range of places and people. Hedbidge’s trickle-up theory as described earlier fits into this because it explains it as a fashion adoption theory which derives its validity through the flow of a trend which originated for a group of people that ultimately shift to mainstream fashion.

American fashion of the 2000s has been recycled consistently such that French fashion houses have begun to make a democratized access to casual wears. Bringing African diasporic fashion into this discussion draws attention to a complex synergy of how French fashion serves as the base for a hybrid Nigerian-American fashion trend. Since Yves Saint Laurent, who was Dior’s protégé, showed his iconic 1967 “African” collection, western fashion designers have repeatedly tapped the heritage of Africa in search of inspiration. African fashion more often than not means African fabrics, animal prints, mud cloth, beads and cowrie shells. He did not specifically showcase his designs using a particular fabric; rather, he decided to tap into the aspect of an overall African aesthetic and designed with beads, cowries, animal prints and feathers. The visionary that Laurent created launched the careers of many dark-skinned models, brought African-inspired designs to the runway and set the pace for new explorations on the African continent by French and American fashion houses. So in essence, Laurent is credited with bringing the ethnic trend to the global runway and ultimately to mainstream fashion scenes.
When Maria Grazia Chiuri hopped on the Afrocentric trend, she keeps Dior’s mantra which in retrospect has served the base for many of their designs, since the New Look, i.e. the rounded shoulders, cinched waist and full skirt that symbolized ultra-femininity. Tapping inspiration from Morocco, featuring a collaboration with local Moroccan artists, and launched in its capital, Marrakesh, Dior’s “Resort ’20 collection” which had a 60's-look theme is a tribute to Africa. Being the first luxury house to center an entire collection around African wax print, Dior has put this vital textile in the spotlight, championing local craftsmanship and “Made in Africa”. The result of this is an eclectic mix of Dior motifs represented in traditional African illustration styles, on capacious jackets and wide skirts and caftans (boubou).

Anthropologist Anne Grosfilley’s work underlines the language of patterns in wax printing. With her partnership, Dior was able to take its classical fabrics toile de jouy\footnote{Toile is a fabric, from the French word meaning "linen cloth" or "canvas", particularly cloth or canvas for painting on.} into a new dimension, an Afrocentric one. In an interview that Grosfilley had with Fashion
Network\textsuperscript{47}, she discussed the partnership between African and European designs and designers.

\textit{FNW: How did Uniwax react to this idea of working with Dior?}

AG: I think they were tremendously flattered and grateful to use the prestige of a maison like Dior to let a light shine on their talents in textiles, and on African designers. It’s a dialogue between Dior’s heritage and their designs. An introduction to wax culture with a lot of freedom to combine both elements. Dior did not just provide work – they allowed Uniwax to display talents. Plus, there were many different collaborations and not just fabrics but also designers like PatheO. All the talents of Africa and of its crafts people are on display. It’s a very powerful message to say that Dior is not afraid to work with Africa. Before Africa was essentially just a source of inspiration and design. What’s unique about Maria Grazia Chiuri is she is not trying to make an African-looking collection but to make a collection that celebrates the Dior style with African talents. It’s really amazing. From Marrakech to West African printing; to beading with references to its role in the cultures of the Aruba in Nigeria; Masai in Tanzania and Zulus in South Africa. The whole of the African

 Continent is celebrated! And the whole continent will really feel proud about this link with Dior.

By the various inventive as well as collaborative engagements of designers in an open market where innovation with African wax print subsists, the continent remains an exciting source of inspiration abounding with a wealth of textile, patterns and ornamentation. In the range of examples given in this chapter, African motifs, ornamentation and western fashion are combined through strong graphics, photo prints and vibrant color and textile combinations to create a dynamic, fluid, hybridized yet original fashion statement. Afropolitan fashion brings the fusion of Afrocentric fashion aesthetics which features combinations of commonplace apparel items that represent dissonance with selected preeminent pieces from Africa’s primordial past and its present with western fashion. Sagoe, Folawiyo, Ade, Iyamah, Udemba and Orji, to mention a few, are the new avant-garde Afropolitan designers who can be generally described as “style-benders” of the new age of African fashion in the world.
CHAPTER FOUR

Contemporary Fashion: *Aso Oke* and The New Wave

Migration, globalization, and the issue of transnationalism have served as tools for study regarding fashion and its dynamism. The traditional *Aso Oke* has traveled beyond the spheres of Nigeria into the global West, and new versions of the conventional dress style have been manipulated by contemporary Nigerian fashion designers. In essence, emphasis is placed on the unique and modern modularity of designs borrowed from the West that Nigerian fashion designers have invented with their local fabric, the *Aso Oke*. African history can be rewritten and recounted from an African perspective using its way of life (music, fashion, dance, art, ceremonies) as objects and artifacts to write and even rewrite African history. Drawing from an afro-centric viewpoint, this paper examines, through fashion, the influence of globalization on the indigenous Nigerian (Yoruba) identity, focusing on the mutating cloth culture of the traditional regalia in this era of globalization.

Many ethnic groups from the African continent have gone through western contacts that have either caused a loss of cultural identity or a rebirth of new ideologies. Clothing is perhaps one of the most visual modes of identity representation that functions in distinguishing one group of people from the other. Clothing therefore becomes inherent in the constructions and reconstructions of identity, and how we are able to represent our consciousness through it. For the purpose of this paper, I will be looking at representations of clothing in fashion by specific Nigerian female designers who have modernized the traditional *Aso Oke* fabric into contemporary fashion styles, as a way of reconstructing the modern feminine identity.

For centuries, people or social orders have utilized garments as a type of nonverbal correspondence to show occupation, rank, sex, and social status. Fashion covers dress, beauty, hairdos, accessories and body craftsmanship. Our dressing tells a story of who we are, where we come from and how we would like to be addressed. Clothing as a discourse of fashion is an
outward expression of one’s identity or a representation of a collective cultural identity. Barnard in his *An Introduction: Fashion Theory*, juxtaposes fashion with identity where he explains the discourse of identity as a compelling concept in the humanities, therefore, fashion takes a crucial role in the discussion of representing identities. The implementation of fashion theory for this paper is that it helps address the aesthetics, cultural and individual style outcomes. In the chapter, Fashion and Communication, Barnard mentions that “fashion and clothing enable members of a group to share their common identity, they provide a way or place of meeting”. (Barnard, 1996). He portrays fashion as a non-verbal cultural language of a people- a communicative phenomenon. Similarly, in Yoruba culture, one’s appearance communicates their importance, their affluence and who they are in general.

The Yoruba word ‘*Aso Oke*’ is an abbreviation of the full word ‘*Aso ilu oke*’, which translates as ‘clothe of the upper side’. It is the staple and the traditional attire of the Southwestern people of Nigeria, popularly known as the Yoruba people. It is almost impossible to talk of the emerging trends with the *Aso Oke* fabric without having a background knowledge and understanding the cultural significance of the traditional material. What makes this fabric produced by the local indigenes of Southwestern Nigeria is that they are handwoven and sold by women. The cloth is produced mainly in Iseyin (Oyo State), Ede (Osun State), and Okene (Kogi State), all in Southern Nigeria. From the stretching of the cotton to the weaving, dyeing, designing, texturizing, and eventually, sewing is predominantly handled by women. Cotton is an essential raw material and is easily accessible to the people from this region. The Yoruba are renowned and impeccable cloth weavers, a craft that they practice to meet their fashion taste and a variety of needs. The making of the *Aso Oke* is an exciting sight to see because the fabric is made into different colors as requested by the consumers. Different colors are run and woven together on the weaving machine to create exceptional pieces. This quintessential fabric is decorated with special patterns made from dyed strands of material that are then woven into
yards of cloth. These yards of cloth are sewn together to form the larger piece, which will then be sewn into the desired style by a tailor. The patterns and colors used for the final product of the cloth have specific meanings amongst the Yoruba and are even peculiar to sub-ethnic groups. Ancient Yoruba cloth started with the *Etu, Sanyan, and Alaari*, these three were the original and untainted first set of *Aso Oke* made for all Yorubas to wear. The *Etu* is a dark blue-indigo dyed cloth, often with thin light blue stripes. *Etu* means guinea fowl because it resembles the bird’s plumage. *Sanyan* is woven from the beige cotton collected locally from the cocoons of the Anaphase moth. It is a pale brown/beige cloth, commonly worn during weddings and funerals. *Alaari* is woven with either synthetically or locally grown cotton and shining threads, sometimes with perforated patterns.

Since the *Aso Oke* is an identity marker of these people, it is however not surprising that when there are ceremonies, family members of a household wear the same color and pattern of fabric (as provided by the female weaver), as a sign of communal identity. The collective wearing of the same fabric for a function is called *Aso ebi*, which means family clothing; it’s a sign of unity. Ojo E. B. in his *Printing Contemporary Handwoven Fabrics (Aso-Oke) in Southwestern Nigeria* states that there are different traditional types of Aso-Oke of most distinguishable types by patterns and texture: the *sanyan*, the *alaari*, and the *etu*. Apart from these, there are dynamic creations with modern styles and embellishments made to fit the international market. According to Ojo, the creation of “modern motifs and patterns…are desirable to enhance Aso-Oke aesthetic values for the insatiable desires of consumers and sellers” (31).

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48 The *sanyan* is made woven from anaph wild silk and cotton yarns. *Alaari* is woven with either synthetic or locally grown cotton and shining threads, sometimes with perforated patterns, while the *Etu* type usually bears dark indigo colors with tiny white stripes noted for their simplicity.
As early as pre-colonial times, Yoruba women saw it as their duty to clothe their household in order to meet domestic needs while their husbands went to the farm or to hunt. They produced of the woven cloth and even offered them the chance to pass down the skills to their female offspring. The production of these traditional handcrafted textiles among the people is long rooted in their culture and has become a part of them, which is why it is still in production till today. The Yoruba person without Aso Oke is like stripping a person without their essential identifier. Oyelola as cited by Bankole-Race in Resplendence and the Yoruba prestige textile Aso-Oke submits that Aso Oke is reserved for special occasions where formal and dignified dressing is required (132). Yoruba women wear the Aso Oke as “oja”, a girdle to strap babies, “iro”-wrapper, “gele”-head-tie, “buba”-top/blouse and “ipele”-shawl while Yoruba men use Aso Oke as casual wears and work clothes. For traditional ceremonies and functions, the men wear a complete attire consisting of “sokoto” trousers, “buba” top, “agbada” an overall flowing garment and the (fila) cap (see figure 2). The Aso Oke is also valued by the Yoruba people because of the customary value attached to it.

(Fig 2) (Photo credit: illustration by urbanstax. Source: Getty Images)
*Aso Oke* is not only used to cover the body, it is a significant clothing used to express wealth, power and prestige. The philosophy of the people is highly attached to this quintessential cloth, therefore, anyone seen in this fabric is regarded as a titled person.

The art of creating this cloth is tied to the industrious Yoruba man who despises laziness, and so the art of weaving this cloth gives them the opportunity to express the perception of their values. *Aso Oke* is also used for religious and spiritual purposes, where the fabric is embellished and laced with charms. The “*Egungun*” are the masquerades amongst the Yoruba, which refers to ‘masked men’ who represent the spirits of the living dead. The aso-oke is used in excess so that the masquerade has a long trail of clothes behind them. A new strip of *Aso Oke* is added to the *Egungun* costume yearly which foretells the age of the masquerade.

Although the use of *Aso Oke* as masquerade costume was popular pre-colonial Nigeria, the introduction of Christianity by the Westerners eradicated this tradition but is still practiced in extremely rural areas of Southwest Nigeria.

The shift of the traditional production of the *Aso Oke* shifted right after the colonial masters had left the shores of West Africa. Prior to them leaving, the aided the free and fair trade exchange of the fabric during slave trade and even across the bight of Benin, and to other parts of Nigeria. The sustainability the production of *Aso Oke* today amongst the Yoruba people, has seen solely relied on the materials imported into the country, coupled with the fact that Yorubas are natural sociable people who have one ceremony or the other to attend. The importation of dye for the loom from China have helped the texture of the fabric drastically and has in fact made it easier to wear and softer on the skin. The local dye had a very coarse feel and added weight to the already heavy fabric. For the *Aso Oke*, beauty is not only conferred in the appearance of the cloth but in the intention, precision, accuracy and creativity of the weaver.
By the late 1950s and early 1960s, imported clothes became casual wears while Aso Oke became selective for important occasions, and this pushed for the near extinction of Aso Oke. Fashion itself is a modern European phenomenon. In Africa, other than the use of clothes body decoration, the body is equally adorned with painting, tattooing and jewelry. What is unique to Africans, specifically, Nigerians is their traditional fabrics and their conventional style- the Adire and Aso Oke of the Yoruba people, the Ogodo of the Igbo people and the Abaya of the Hausas. Dwellers in Nigeria can distinguish the Eastern way of dressing from that of the Northern or Western as each identifies with the various ethnic groups. Traditional clothing hardly ever changes. If any change occurs, it is only in very little details, and this can be very rare. It is the influx of Westernization and the mimicry of the white man’s culture that alters conventional designs.

The 1970s was a defining period for Nigerian fashion. This period was particularly boisterous for the Nigerian fashion industry as the military rule of the time, led by General Olusegun Obasanjo, imposed a ban on the importation of ready-made clothes. The ban gave rise to the creation of home-made brands rather than the importation of ready-to-wears. Prior to this, the Nigerian market had been taken over with the importation of English ready to wears from England. With the dire aim of preserving the pristine Nigerian culture, the ban was placed of these importations. The first style with the Aso Oke fabric to surface after this, was the Oleku. The Oleku style trend originated in this period as illustrated by a 1997 movie of the same name by the legendary Tunde Kelani. During this period, the traditional “iro” and “buba” style shifted from the long sleeves and wrapper to but the new invention the character in the movie wore captivated women’s attention. Women loved the oversized sleeves with high-waist wrappers which stopped at knee length, worn by the female lead character in the movie. (see figure 3)
Due to the exposure that globalization and exchange of ideas brought about, Aso Oke is still very much in use and to further the discuss the new wave of the Aso Oke designs, it is important to exploit the advantages that have come with globalization. As people continue to explore the world, there will inherently be a nexus between local knowledge and Western standard of fashion. The impact of globalization have even transcended beyond the appropriation of Western designs but have begun to have some technological innovations such laser embroidery and stoning. Especially for the Aso Oke, rhinestones have been implemented into its designs, which is somewhat similar to how the masquerades garment used to be laced with charms. However, the inclusion of rhinestones has no spiritual meaning to it, it is a new way of adding beauty to the already colorful fabric, as a means of popularizing it even more. When the fabric is sewn into the desired design, it is then adorned with extremely tiny stones thereby giving it a sparkly effect. This technique is mostly used for brides, and some designers go as far as sourcing for Swarovski stones depending how exorbitantly they are paid.
Many of the initial designs were appropriations of the readymade clothes that swamped the market after the military leader in the 70s banned the importation. By the early 2000s, many designers had migrated from Nigeria to find greener pastures and establish themselves in other Western countries. Prominent in this period, was Deola Sagoe. After her return from fashion school in London and New York, her brand remains one of the most respected fashion labels in Nigeria till date. Sagoe is known for her attention to detail and unique design aesthetic, Sagoe has consistently been a notable yardstick in exploring the business of fashion in Lagos, the central hub of Nigeria. Her many mixes of Nigerian and Western designs, saw her using the traditional fabric markers of her Yoruba heritage to make western pieces. She is in fact, popularly known to have remodeled the traditional “*iro and buba*” into what she calls “Komole”, sourcing for her fabrics from Europe. It has become one of the most sought-after and high-end ceremonial attires for many Nigerians. Sagoe believed that the traditional making of *Aso Oke* with cotton was too heavy considering the hot climate, so she began to make her own fabric but instead with cotton, she used silk, which was a lighter fabric and even appeared
more expensive because of the glossy look satin fabrics have. She then took her creations up a notch, by creating casual dresses with the *Aso Oke* fabric. She created an African cosmopolitan fashion for the African woman by synthesizing the western fashion ideology she had been exposed to while studying in the United States with her pre-lived Nigerian consciousness and awareness of fashion. Deola Sagoe made modern dresses for all classes of women but with the inclusion of the *Aso Oke* as a signifier of heritage.

(Fig. 5&6, designed by Deola Sagoe. Photograph: @aecstudios)

This hybridity was a trend in fashion, it was to promote the cultural heritage of both parties. This took fashion in Nigeria beyond the walls of a regular tailor to the hands of creative fashion designers, who had witnessed global exposure. Nigerian and even African fabrics were seamed with western wools and cotton to make outstanding pieces. Nigerian designers like Ejiro Amos Tafiri, Lisa Folawiyo and Lanre DaSilva Ajayi were known for using traditional Nigerian fabric (*Aso Oke*) to create contemporary pieces which were authentically Nigerian but could compete with designs on any global platform.
Women infiltrated this sector and the monolithic usage of *Aso Oke* for one style began to transcend the confines on the rigid style the Yoruba knew. Contemporariness and globalization has seen Nigerian fashion transition from the conventional - which is based on the notion that the African feminine body is sacred, and therefore should not be exposed. The developing syncretic western-African style collections have experienced a blend not only in fabric but also in how the female body is represented. The conceptualization of dressing in the Yoruba culture is attached to the *Omoluabi* philosophy which denounces that a Yoruba person must always dress well and have moral standards in her appearance and character. As cited by O. O. Victor in “Omoluabi: Re-thinking the Concept of Virtue in Yoruba Culture and Moral System”, Samuel Johnson in *History of the Yorubas* espouses that the concept of “Omoluabi” is “the standard of measure which determines the morality and the immorality of an act in Yoruba society in Africa” (86).

Twenty-first century Nigerian designs have been able to put this in consideration, where fashion staples such as, Dior’s hourglass silhouette, Marilyn Monroe’s halter neck, Chanel’s female power suit or even Mary Quaints mini skirt have been indoctrinated. These borrowings have created a new wave of fashion amongst Nigerian women. *Aso Oke* was not only used for *iro, buba, agbada, ipele*, they were now made into coats for the winter, handbags, tops, kimonos, and even shoes. These creations exude fashion statements that are timeless but native and cultural in content. It does not take away the royalty that comes with wearing the fabric since its regarded as high fashion, but it allows for the inclusion of everyone to feel as a part of a culture whether they are in a casual wear or not.

Deola Sagoe was one of the first designers to use *Aso Oke* to make ready to wear dresses, casual and cooperate outfits, thereby working traditional fabric with modern

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silhouettes. Shekudo, a Nigerian-Australian designer does something interesting with her chosen *Aso Oke* fabrics. She is popularly known as an accessory designer who makes pieces like earrings, bracelets, ties but has recently added the production of shoes to her list of creations. She creates astonishing shoes, (flats, mules and even boots) with the *Aso Oke* fabric. Her mantra is that the feet takes us to places and they should do the justice of telling the story of where one comes from. Shekudo is known to produce pieces from extremely colorful *Aso Oke* pieces because for her “shoes should not be boring”, hence why she doesn’t produce with just one color but rather a blend of many colors.

*Fig.6 (Photos retrieved from www.shekudo.com)*

Similarly, in a YouTube interview by Fashion Insider with Shadiat Alasooke (a Nigerian fashion designer) on December 13, 2018, she details how she channels her creativity outside of the regular roles of the traditional *Aso Oke* performs. “I design mostly for brides and if you look at my designs, they follow the typical iro-buba formula, but this is this is the 21st century, why not switch it up a bit. I love to deal with colors when designing because as people with darker skin tone, we need colors to get that attention”. This statement is very interesting because Shadiat understands the role that *Aso Oke* plays and what each piece means, while she is being creative with her colors and embellishments, she keeps the utilitarian function of the fabric in mind.
Tosin Oshinmowo is one of the very refined contemporary artisans that thinks outside the box. She uses the Aso Oke fabric as architecture. She designs chairs, footstools and pillows, then covers them with the fabric to celebrate her native Yoruba culture. Her designs have been appreciated by many home and abroad because of the innovation behind it. Like the creatives mentioned above, and as an African artist, she embraces bright colors and incorporates them in her work. (see fig. 8)

When it comes to Aso Oke, the play with colors is what brings its essence to life. This may be possible because products made of cotton might appear dull and so to add statement to the productions, colors are infused. There is however no gainsay that the Aso Oke has stood the test of time, however the innovation of contemporaries have made this tradition sustainable. A
merely descriptive definition of hybridity would be instances of mixture abound in intercultural
type relation – and in this case, a mixing of east and west culture to which this paper has done,
in representing the convergence between fashion of two disparate cultures. For the human in
the global space, cultural identity is ‘fashioned‘ through an inter-mixing of distinct or related
cultural materials to achieve particular textures of communication, difference and
transformation. Twenty-first century fashion industry all over the world, has seen a shift from
fashion as glamour to fashion as a conveyer of identity while still doing the former. The reality
is that our fashion of a major conveyer of our identity, the fusion and exploration of this art has
allowed the Afropolitan idea of being a global citizen, travelling without leaving home. These
new generation of creatives with their new wave of designs, have allowed people draw on their
local and cultural belief systems to put their own original turn around on the global products
of fashion. As represented and through cultural tapings in Nigerian and American fashion
modes, the local can be made global, and the global localized. This mix of ideas and materials
defines cultural cohesiveness, semiotic communication, and sense of belonging for the
transnational migrant, as much as it confers power to female presence.

Although, the indigenous Aso Oke has a long history of adding to the essential Yoruba
identity and has undergone transformation texture, color and most importantly modernized in
terms of its styles and usage, it has not diminished in cultural significance but instead has stood
the test of time, thereby adding to its value. It must be emphasized that modernity has provoked
the productions various types of Aso Oke and the exposure the creatives behind the constant
modification of these products have helped its sustainability.
CONCLUSION

Like many Africans who have relocated to the West, either for the purpose of education or for better opportunities, I distinctively fall under the category of new citizens who ask how they can forge an identity for themselves, being that they are in a new space. Art is an expression made visible by the extrinsic output of intrinsic imagination. The artist creates, expresses and recreates in order to form meaning or new interpretations. Most importantly, I view art in the sense that it accurately “reveals” expressions. As expressive art form, fashion falls in this category as it is one of the purists forms of artistry.

With fashion and art at its center, comes the importance of aesthetics which means that for a true work of art to be considered relevant, the realistic presentation of its subject matter must be believable. The effectiveness of the colors, lines, texture, shape and forms are cogent because, once a piece of art fulfils these qualities, it does not need to look life-like to achieve an overall unity. Fashion as expressive art form is almost always concrete and tangible, and its value is both intrinsic and aesthetic, but it also has the contextual value of being utilitarian or didactic. Focusing on Euro-American fashion and its interconnectedness with the emerging African fashion, this study has taken a three-pronged approach to first discuss the unabashed stance of fashion originating in Paris, the spread and provision of a fashion ideology for both Americans and global fashion, and then an extensive discussion on the concept of an Afropolitan fashion in the context of an hybridized community. Highlighting Dior’s works gives a propelling image of how integral his institution was within his immediate space (France) and his influence on other fashion houses, especially in creating a fashion sense for Americans, and which many other designers imitated.

Fashion is not static. Change is the only constant component of fashion. So the trends that we grasp today in fashion will change and what we wear today will probably be ridiculed or become jaded in few years. The corset belt used to accentuate curves is still trending since
Dior brought it into the market and t-shirts with texts and graphics have been in vogue since the late 1990s. From this, one has to understand that what seems normal to us today is still something relatively new. The denim for example has been around for ages, but it was unthinkable to wear it regularly in 1917 but contemporary denim styles by Levi Strauss, Buck Mason or Raleigh denim have changed over time to suit the style trends of seasons. What will denim possibly evolve to be? With the new age and new trends, fashion has become timeless and with the limitless creative possibilities, we are able to explore and experiment even more. While western fashion caters for almost everyone, what fashion then caters for new generation Africans?

The creation of a specific African fashion trend cannot be void of the African fabric which serves the purpose of tracing the origin, history and voyage of the batik from Indonesia to Africa, and its eventual identification as a universal fabric. While there are several indigenous and local African fabrics, the African wax print (originally called batik/Dutch wax print) has stood the test of time for African people and popularized the colorful variants beyond the shores of Africa. With Nigeria being the largest group of people on the continent and perhaps the most educated group of people, it is not surprising to me that the country is bolstering with incredible artisans and artistry. Globalization therefore has helped creative minds from this region to innovate and explore new expressions; hence, operations in this region and contact with other spaces have encouraged hybridity.

Placing the Ankara fabric at the center of Afropolitan fashion allows for the democratization of the fabric, among first, women and the Black community. For Dior, woman is style and because of these traits that women have, Dior argues that women are the most appropriate sex to express real fashion. As textile of interest, it is noteworthy that the Ankara fabric is mostly worn by women. It has a maternal feel to it and an essential commodity amongst women, especially pregnant women and nursing mothers who receive them as gift. It
is imperative that in the textile market, the *Ankara* has multiple formations, with various combinations of colors, patterns and textures of fabric. As a popular fabric in Nigerian society, the *Ankara* is extremely unifying, such that it brings people from different walks of life together, as it is rarely a respecter of class. When I think of Ankara especially in the Nigerian context, it is the only fabric that allows over 250 ethnic groups with numerous languages to unify.

For the appraisal of this portfolio, I specially analyze the shift that traditional cloths-Ankara and Aso-Oke have undergone, the designs that are trending within the continent, and with exposure, globalization and the idea of an Afropolitan new cool (for example, those who mix *Ankara* pants with shirt, denim jacket with *Ankara* skirt, plain dress with *Ankara* scarf, free flowing dress with Ankara-inspired corset, *Aso Oke* inspired shoes and evolving dress styles). I analyze the incredible productions by diasporic designers and affluent designers on the continent, and the intriguing results from the collaborations of western fashion houses with this African textile.

This study focuses on the emergence of new fashion designers who are making waves on the global stage, starting from the African continent and across the African diaspora. From popular lines such as Deola Sagoe, Lisa Folawiyo, and Enna Attah Udemba, to Andrea Iyamah, Buki Ade, Nicolette Orji as exemplars, I analyze the myriad reasons why African fashion is having its current international recognition, since it especially caters for diasporic Africans and contemporary Africans. These designers are looking beyond clichés of the African aesthetic by embracing both traditional and contemporary ideologies to creation. In conclusion, I note that there is a greater visibility to the presence of African fashion in the global stage, the stir of which has been evidently established within the African diaspora, precisely the world of Afropolitans.
REFERENCES


