

2016

Style Migrations: South-South Networks of African Fashion

Victoria L. Rovine
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, vrovine@unc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas>

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Fashion Design Commons](#), and the [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rovine, Victoria L.. "Style Migrations: South-South Networks of African Fashion." *Artl@s Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (2016): Article 4.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

Style Migrations: South-South Networks of African Fashion

Victoria L. Rovine *

*University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill*

Abstract

Fashion design from Africa and by African designers provides a rich source of information about south-south networks of influence and inspiration. Using several case studies, this article explores the products of cultural interactions between Africa and other world regions, and between cultures within Africa, to illuminate south-south networks of innovation. Case studies include the work of Sakina M'Sa, Maimouna Diallo, and the distinctive embroidery of northern Mali known as "Ghana Boy" style.

Résumé

La mode venue d'Afrique ou de stylistes africains fournit une riche source d'information sur les réseaux d'influence et d'inspiration Sud-Sud. A partir de plusieurs études de cas, cet article explore les échanges culturels entre l'Afrique et d'autres régions du monde, ainsi qu'entre différentes cultures au sein de l'Afrique, afin de mettre en lumière les réseaux d'innovation Sud-Sud. Les études de cas comprennent les travaux de Sakina M'Sa, Maimouna Diallo, et la broderie propre au Nord du Mali, connue et désignée souvent sous le nom de style « Ghana Boy ».

** Dr. Victoria L. Rovine is an Associate Professor of Art History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is the author of two books African Fashion Global Style: Histories, Innovations, and Ideas You Can Wear and Bogolan: Shaping Culture through Cloth in Contemporary Mali (both Indiana U Press). She is a VIAD Research Associate at the University of Johannesburg.*

Maimouna Diallo, a fashion designer based in Bamako, Mali, creates long, flowing gowns made of expensive, brocade fabrics, sold under her brand name Maimour Style. Each garment is embroidered with geometric patterns, concentrated around the yoke and reaching down the front and back. The patterns are applied by hand and, more commonly, using sewing machines. Gowns in this style, called *boubous*, are associated with formal dress worn to celebrations and to important political and religious events, blending with more Western-associated dress styles in many contexts. In all of these elements—composition, style, medium, use context—Diallo’s work fits well into the dress conventions of Malian communities.

But Maimour Style designs are distinct, bringing Diallo an enthusiastic clientele from elsewhere in francophone West Africa—Niger, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire—and also further afield. The brand has found markets in Nigeria, Ghana, in Central African cities, and in African communities in Europe. While tailors, embroiderers, and designers create *boubous* or similar garments in all of these settings, Diallo has developed a distinctive style that makes her designs different, and thus desirable well beyond their local market. That style reflects the designer’s participation in south-south networks of inspiration, a factor that differentiates her from her colleagues and propels her designs across national and regional boundaries. Rather than looking to the Western-dominated global fashion market, a practice that characterizes the work of many African designers, Diallo’s key innovations are drawn from her explorations of dress practices elsewhere in Africa.

The brand’s distinctive embroidery style, characterized by blocks of bold colors in sharp-edged geometric patterns, owes much to Diallo’s study of Zulu beadwork from South Africa.¹ For a Malian designer, the dress practices of New York, Paris, or Milan are much more accessible than those of South Africa, Kenya, or Nigeria—substantially more effort is required to seek out

¹ Interview, Bamako, 20 February 2010.

images and information from elsewhere in Africa, while European and North American culture is prominent, circulated in every form of mass media. Although she has traveled widely in West Africa and makes occasional trips to Europe, Diallo has not been to Southern Africa. Indeed, one can more cheaply fly from Bamako to a European fashion center such as Milan or Paris than to an African one like Johannesburg or even Lagos, Nigeria. The European orientation of intra-African travel offers a parallel to the itineraries of inspiration that characterize much African fashion design; reaching beyond the mass media coverage of fashion trends produced by European and North American brands is a challenge for designers based in Africa. Using a book on South African dress, Diallo adapted the geometries and brilliant colors of beaded ornaments to reimagine the abstractions of Malian embroidered garments. Her work exemplifies the potential productivity of south-south networks, bypassing—or at least not stopping in—Europe in favor of innovations inspired by other fashion worlds.

Inspiration and Contamination

The essence of fashion is innovation. This category of clothing is distinguished from other dress practices by the deliberate, self-conscious nature of its changing styles, often inspired by exploration beyond its creators’ cultural milieu. In European fashion design, these adventures beyond the familiar are emblemized by the work of Paul Poiret, Yves Saint Laurent, and Jean-Paul Gaultier, designers renowned for their “exotic” sources of inspiration.² Fashion, thus, offers a rich field for analysis of visual culture that is fueled by its practitioners’ reach across cultural divides, revealing networks of direct and indirect interactions, undergirded by histories of colonial and postcolonial power asymmetries.

In the few studies of African participation in cross-

² See: Kristyne Loughran, “The Idea of Africa in European High Fashion: Global Dialogues.” *Fashion Theory* 13, no. 2 (2009): 243-271; Victoria L. Rovine, *African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovations, and Ideas You Can Wear* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 70-105.

cultural sartorial systems, flows of influence are conceptualized as a binary, with Western styles at one pole, and the dress practices of African and other non-Western regions at the other. And nearly all of the scholarship on interchange between these poles is focused on the inspiration that flows in one direction—from the West to Africa. Studies of the absorption of Western styles by African communities have addressed the role of the top hat in pre-colonial and colonial era Ghana; the appearance of jodhpurs in Zulu portrait photography of the early twentieth century; the dress innovations of an early twentieth century Cameroonian ruler; the transformation of British-supplied cloth into distinctively local textiles in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, and one could go on.³ Far less attention has been devoted to Africa's impact on fashion and dress practices in Western contexts, including textile designers' absorption of decorative motifs drawn from African forms, and European haute couture designers' reimagined African styles.⁴

While these investigations have addressed the complexities and specificities of adaptations as dress styles are absorbed into new contexts, this dichotomous structure reveals only north-south or south-north interactions. The products of cultural interactions between Africa and other world regions, and between cultures within Africa, illuminate south-south networks of innovation. These are networks in which Western influence is absent, minimal, or simply not the key animating force, producing garments such as Maimouna Diallo's Zulu-infused boubous. Aminata Dramane Traoré, Malian sociologist and former Minister of Culture, described this interaction: "The clothing traditions of the various [African] ethnic groups and cultures are now shifting and interacting to create a new African aesthetic which includes a universal element. The people of coastal and

central Africa now wear boubous and bogolan [a Malian textile], while kente [a Ghanaian textile] and raffia are now found in the countries of the Sahel."⁵

Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's conceptualization of cosmopolitanism illuminates the globalizing tendencies of much fashion design. Appiah proposes cosmopolitanism as an alternative to globalization, a term that, he argues, has come to refer to the broad flows of culture, capital, and information rather than to the human experience of these flows.⁶ Clothing is the image Appiah employs to describe the common conceptions of the cosmopolitan: "You imagine a *Comme des Garçons*-clad sophisticate with a platinum frequent-flyer card regarding, with kindly condescension, a ruddy-faced farmer in workman's overalls."⁷ Rejecting this parody of "high" and "low" styles of dress, which separates the two into completely distinct cultural domains, Appiah calls for a return to the term's original and, for him, more fruitful connotation, which emphasizes contact rather than difference.⁸

Appiah's cosmopolitanism is embodied in the inspirations of fashion design, whose creators draw from both "high" and "low," moving between cultural influences and world regions. Indeed, influential brands like Paris-based *Comme des Garçons* (founded by Japanese designer Rei Kawakubo) might draw inspiration from Indian saris, workman's overalls, and West African gowns. Likewise, as I will demonstrate, African fashion innovators may find inspiration in *Comme des Garçons*, South Asian popular culture, dress practices elsewhere in Africa, or from their own, now distant, cultural roots. Rather than networks that are defined by the crossing of boundaries between categories—high to low, or African to Western—this conception recognizes that images and ideas move beyond the restrictions of

³ See, for example: Jean Comaroff, "The Empire's Old Clothes: Fashioning the Colonial Subject," in *Cross-Cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities*, David Howes, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 19-38; Sandra Klopper, "Gentlemen at Leisure: Riding Breeches in the Photographic Portrait Images of Black South African Men," in Barringer et al., eds. *Art and the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2007), 327-336; Nii Quarcoopome, "Balancing Power and Parody" in Quarcoopome, ed. *Through African Eyes* (Detroit Institute of Arts, 2009), 75-85.

⁴ Susan Hannel, "'Africana' Textiles: Imitation, Adaptation, and Transformation during the Jazz Age," *Textile* 4, no. 1 (2006): 68-103; Loughran, "The Idea of Africa in European High Fashion;" Rovine, *African Fashion, Global Style*.

⁵ Aminata Dramane Traoré, "African Fashion: A Message," in *The Art of African Fashion* Els van der Plas and Marlous Willemsen, eds. (The Hague: Prince Clause Fund, 1998), 8-9.

⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁷ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), xiii.

⁸ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, xiv.

categories.

Appiah suggests the term “contamination” to describe the process by which cultural influences move across cultures. Such contamination spreads ideas rather than disease, enriching cultures and offering a model of cultural change that values transformation rather than preservation: “When people speak for an ideal of cultural purity, sustaining the authentic culture of the Asante or the American family farm, I find myself drawn to contamination as the name of a counter-ideal.”⁹

Appiah again employs cloth and clothing to describe the products of contamination: “The textiles most people think of as traditional West African cloths are known as java prints, and arrived with the Javanese batiks sold, and often milled, by the Dutch . . . And so with our kente cloth: the silk was always imported, traded by Europeans, produced in Asia. This tradition was once an innovation.”¹⁰ Through the trans-regional histories of these textiles, one of which is described below, Appiah describes the complex distinctions and interactions between local and global, African and Western, traditional and modern. This conception animates all of these categories, highlighting their fluidity in fashion markets, where the crosscurrents of contamination, from south to north, north to south, and—my focus here—from south to south, produce sartorial innovations.

Transcolonial Networks of Imagery

Extending Appiah’s consideration of cultural flows and contamination, dress innovations offer insights into a sub-category of south-south interactions: those that can be traced to transcolonial networks. Colonial histories produce cultural connections that endure beyond the empires that created them; this legacy is clearly evident in Africa’s Anglophone and Francophone realms. Dress practices offer one form of evidence of the enduring influence of transcolonial

networks, reaching beyond the demise of the colonial systems that produced them. Indeed, to define transcoloniality, Françoise Lionnet turns to textiles to represent the tightly bound strands of cultures and subjectivities that converge to produce new forms that are not simply combinations, or hybrids, or adaptations. She describes transcoloniality, manifested in the “diverse, unexpected, and exuberantly impure identities that have emerged from colonial history,” as:

...a metaphorical model of relatedness that is neither that of master and slave, nor those of hybridity and the borderland; it is not a system within which binaries obtain. As with the intertwining threads of a weave, the strength or functionality of the assemblage depends on the relative positioning of each element within the collective grouping. This model of subjectivity is defined by *métissage* in its etymological sense: the interweavings of different fibers to create a heterogeneous social or cultural fabric...¹¹

A mid-20th century fashion innovation from West Africa exemplifies the complexity, and the exuberance, of the products of these transcolonial networks that traverse cultures of the global south. This dress innovation was produced by the pressure placed on rural young men by the imposition of colonial-era taxation systems and by the movement of products and images along networks created by colonial rule in far-flung regions. This case also exemplifies the unintended and occasionally generative impacts of colonial power networks.

Embroidered tunics from Mali in a style known as “Ghana Boy” are adorned with embroidered figures, words, and abstract patterns. [Fig. 1 a and 1 b] Their history and iconography make Ghana Boy tunics difficult to classify.

⁹ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 111.

¹⁰ Java prints, also known as wax or Dutch wax prints, are omnipresent in many African fashion systems (Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 107).

¹¹ Françoise Lionnet, “Transnationalism, Postcolonialism or Transcolonialism? Reflections on Los Angeles, Geography, and the Uses of Theory.” *Emergences* 10 #1 (2000): 27-29.



Figure 1a and 1b. Ghana boy tunic (front and back), collected in Djenné, Mali, 1993.

These garments are the products of both an internal diaspora and colonial histories; in addition to reflecting West African cultures and the residue of European rule, they are inflected with South Asian cultural influence that travels along the routes of British imperialism. Although they also appear to incorporate aspirational representations of Western commodities and lifestyles, this garment style emerges out of networks that may only occasionally and obliquely intersect with Western imagery and meanings. Ghana Boy tunics were made primarily in the 1960s and 70s by young Malian men while they were working temporarily in Ghana, hence the name “Ghana Boy.” The tunics are made of heavy cotton fabric and adorned with bright cotton thread embroidery. The cloth and the thread were likely acquired in Ghana; the style and iconography developed out of the distinct perspective these young Malian men brought to their encounter with urban Ghana.

The young travellers whose innovations produced this style were primarily from the Inland Niger Delta region of central Mali, which has long been a crossroads of cultures. Records of trade networks in Arabic and European records as early as the eighth century attest to the flows of goods and people across deserts and along waterways, circulating products, people, and cultural influences.¹² Labor migration from the inland savannahs to Ghana and other countries is nothing new but instead a continuation of a history of connections across vast landscapes. The region remains multiethnic and cosmopolitan; Ghana Boy tunics have been made by young men from several different ethnic groups in the Inland Niger Delta, including the Dogon, Songhai, Fulani, and Bozo.¹³ Labor migration is a central aspect of livelihoods

¹² See: Sam Nixon “Excavating Essouk-Tadmakka (Mali): new archaeological investigations of early Islamic trans-Saharan trade,” *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 44 #2 (2009): 217-255.

¹³ In his seminal work on embroidered boubous in West Africa, Bernhard Gardi notes that the garments are difficult to associate with a single ethnic group or region: “One cannot fit each type of boubou into a clearly delimited region or an ethnic group... The Hausa tradition is also that of the Nupe... Classification of boubous by region is equally problematic: they have always been a system of status, and as a result are often worn far from their centers of manufacture.” Bernhard Gardi, *Le Boubou C'est Chic: Les boubous du Mali et d'Autres Pays de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (Basel: Museum der Kulturen Basel, 2000): 19-20.

across the Sahel. Young men (and less frequently women) from the region have long traveled to Bamako, Mali's capital, to neighboring countries, to France, and, more recently, migrants have aimed to find work in the Gulf region, Europe, and elsewhere. Travel provided a means of seeking one's fortune, proving one's courage, and building status in the community. Clothing is a means of visibly announcing young men's experience abroad, marking their new status in public arenas.

In the 1960s and 70s, Ghana was a major destination for migrants. As they moved between Mali and Ghana, young men traversed linguistic, ecological, and colonial zones. Just as they crossed savannah lands and forests, these travelers moved between the global networks created by European colonialization in the region. In an interview about his journey to Accra as a young man, Kariba Bouaré, a former Ghana Boy from Djenné, recalled his experiences in rich detail.¹⁴ He described the route he took as well as his impressions of people and places along the way. The term "Ghana Boy," used to describe those who made the trip and returned with such stories, is in English rather than Songhai, Dogon, or another Malian language (or in French, a language that was deeply embedded by colonial governance). Ghana Boy, then, vividly illustrates the intersection of colonial realms, for Ghana's English as the language of British history in West Africa. For migrants returning to Mali after working in Ghana, using English—not Twi, Ga, or another Ghanaian language—was the linguistic mark of their newfound worldliness.

The tunics' embroidery offers a visual counterpart to the language of foreign adventure. The medium has great significance in the Inland Niger Delta region, where embroidered garments are closely associated with specific forms of status that are tied to Muslim identity. In Timbuktu and Djenné, major cities in the region, embroiderer Baba Djitteye and the members of his atelier create garments in a style that has a centuries-old history, and that is strictly governed by long-

standing conventions. Djitteye and other embroiderers spoke of their medium as a form of prayer; he and his colleagues prepare to embroider as one prepares to pray, washing hands, feet, and face. Further, many embroidery motifs are based in Arabic calligraphy; they originally served protective functions and have become stylistic conventions.¹⁵

The migrant laborers' innovations are evident in a comparison of Ghana Boy tunics with the "classic" style of embroidery created by Djitteye, revealing vast differences in style, function, and iconography. The longstanding embroidery styles are associated with wealth and status that (ideally) results from piousness, while Ghana Boy embroidery represents status that is associated with youth, acquired abroad, and not affiliated with Islam. Ghana Boy tunics employ brilliant colors, while *tilbi* and other elite styles are extraordinarily subtle in color.

The tunics' most dramatic innovation is their incorporation of figurative imagery—depictions of strikingly chic men and women, stoplights and national flags, along with planes, motorcycles, and other modes of transportation. Many of the young Malian migrants who went to Ghana in the 1970s and 80s found work as night watchmen. Their occupation would have given the young men a close-up view of the lives of middle class Ghanaians. They depicted the elements of these lives that fascinated them—women in short skirts with legs crossed, elaborate motorcycles, and streetlights with their red, green, and yellow glow.

The chic attire of two equestrian figures, one with gun drawn, on one tunic appear to be more Hollywood fantasy than daily life. Here, the south-south networks created by colonial history come into play. India and Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) were both part of the British Empire, which created its own global connections; the products of one British colony (or former colony) were exported to others, so that Ghana had Bollywood films before Mali. The posters and films

¹⁴ Interview, Djenné, 20 June 2009.

¹⁵ Labelle Prussin, *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 90-92.

themselves might have been a source of fascination for young men unfamiliar with the genre, which became very popular all over West Africa by the 1970s.¹⁶ The “Western” style clothing of these figures, with bellbottom pants, miniskirts, and halter-tops, may not indicate any association with or aspiration for European or American lifestyles, but rather indicate a fascination with the “exotic” modernity depicted in Bollywood films. On their return home from Ghana, wearing tunics adorned with these figures, young men vividly advertise their experience not only through images of Ghana itself, but through the far-away visions of Indian melodramas accessible through Ghana’s popular visual culture.

Transcolonial Networks of Cloth and Industry

Other instances of transcolonial networks manifested in dress innovations demonstrate the complexity of these exchanges and adaptations. Perhaps the most iconic, and certainly the most visible instance of south-south fashion innovation is Dutch wax cloth, one of the fabrics cited by Appiah as an illustration of the productive power of contamination. [Fig. 2] In the case of Dutch wax cloth, the south-south interactions were initially mediated by the north, through colonial connections and commercial interests. Beginning with the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century, European consumers developed a taste for intricately patterned batik fabrics, made by hand using a wax resist technique. Thus, the Dutch East Indies—part of Holland’s colonial empire—is the first of several participants in the transcolonial network that produced Dutch wax or wax print cloth. The popularity of these resist dyed fabrics in Europe led industrialists in Holland and the UK to seek a means of mass producing similar textiles, using roller prints, a technology developed in the mid-19th century. These efforts

failed to find markets in Europe, but Dutch and British manufacturers found their nations’ African colonies provided a ready market. European producers soon began to design textiles to the tastes of specific African regions—Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Senegal, and so on.¹⁷ The fabrics that developed out of this industry are now made in African as well as European and Asian factories, and they have become icons of African style. As “commemorative cloth,” factory printed textiles play active roles in political discourse, major events and holidays, and in the documentation of histories.¹⁸ The Dutch and British colonial empires shaped this trade, as batik and batik-inspired cloth moved from colony to metropole and then to different colonies within the same imperial orbit—from the East Indies to Europe and to Africa.



Figure 2. Wax print fabrics for sale in Bamako market stall, Mali, 2006. Photograph by V. Rovine.

Though now far from their origins as hand-painted batik, the design of industrially produced wax prints may preserve stylistic references to this transcolonial history. Leslie Rabine describes the efforts of designers in the Sotiba textile factory in Dakar to ensure that the markers of hand-made

¹⁶ See: Brian Larkin, “Itineraries of Indian Cinema: African videos, Bollywood and Global media.” *Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism and Transnational Media*. Eds. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 170-192.

¹⁷ See: Ruth Nielsen, “The History and Development of Wax-Printed Textiles Intended for West Africa and Zaire,” in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment* ed. Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwartz (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 467-495. Christopher B. Steiner, “Another Image of Africa: Toward an Ethnohistory of European Cloth Marketed in West Africa, 1873-1960” *Ethnohistory* 32 (1985): 91-110.

¹⁸ For a recent analysis of this subject, see: Catherine P. Bishop, “Occasional Textiles: Vernacular Landscapes of Development,” *African Arts* 47 #4 (2014): 72-85.

manufacture are reproduced in their factory printed cloth, including elements such as “Le misfit,” which “imitates the leaky border between motif and background that results from the wax-resist dyeing technique.”¹⁹ The final step in the printing process is the application of ‘Le crack,’ a design element that imitates the cracking effect of wax-covered cloth that has been crumpled as it is submerged into the dye vat. The complexity of effectively reproducing what was an accidental—even an undesirable—by-product of the handmade batik required intense effort on the part of the designer: “It took him a whole month and many frustrating tries to produce a realistic representation of dye bleeding through a wax crack.”²⁰ Rabine notes of a cloth that had been carefully designed to incorporate these irregularities: “...the designer said, ‘You feel the African in it.’” Thus, the cloth’s authentic African-ness is located in the deliberate imperfections that mark manufacture by hand. These mass-produced/handmade textiles reflect the continuing transformation—or, using Appiah’s conception, productive contamination—of transcolonial forms, which shed and acquire associations as they move between styles and markets.

Renowned Anglo-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare’s use of wax prints as prominent elements of his work in multiple media draws on precisely these complexities and contaminations to subvert the categories that have conventionally been employed to classify people and cultures.²¹ He is best known for sculptures made of mannequins dressed in Victorian-style garments, tailored in vibrant wax print fabrics. While Shonibare employs wax prints to create fine art rather than fashion, many African designers make use of the fabrics. Indeed, they are omnipresent elements of dress in many parts of Africa, though the history of these textiles is as much transcolonial as it is African.

¹⁹ Leslie W. Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion* (Oxford and New York: Berg Press, 2002), 145.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

²¹ See, for example: John Picton, “Undressing Ethnicity,” *African Arts* 30 #3 (2001): 66-73.

Other African dress innovations inspired by south-south transcolonial networks include the southeastern Nigerian textile pelete bite, made by Kalabari women using an imported Indian textile that they adapt to local tastes by selectively removing threads using a razor.²² The British colonial connection explains the presence of this textile—the British sourced the cloth in their Indian colony, then found a market for it in British West Africa. The fabric’s association with colonial history is evident in its Kalabari name: “George Cloth,” a reference to King George IV. Phyllis Martin describes a more complex transcolonial network, in early twentieth century Brazzaville, where dress practices were influenced not only by the French styles associated with the colonial officials and other French residents, but also by the West African (largely Senegalese) soldiers, clerks, and officials in the employ of the French government.²³ The sartorial confluence of French colonial officials, West African employees of the colonial government, and Congolese dress innovators produced a distinctively Central African dress practice that endures into the present: the Sapeur movement.²⁴ Sapeur attire, worn primarily by Congolese men²⁵, consists of *haute couture* garments, suits and ties, pocket squares and alligator shoes, ostentatious watches, sunglasses, and other accessories, assembled to create ensembles that assert extreme fashionability. While the clothing is rooted in European styles and African colonial histories, it expresses modern Central African identities.

Trancoloniality in High Fashion

While Ghana Boy tunics, Dutch wax prints, Sapeurs, and pelete bite are all forms of dress innovation, none are typical of the designer-branded fashion that circulates via global mass media such as fashion magazines, blogs, and

²² Erekosima and Eicher “Kalabari Cut-Thread and Pulled-Thread Cloth” *African Arts* 14 #2 (1981): 48-51.

²³ Phyllis M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 157-8.

²⁴ Ch. Didier Gondola, “Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth,” *African Studies Review* 42 #1 (1999) 23-48, 26-27.

²⁵ From both the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo.

runway shows. These incarnations of fashion operate via structures that reflect the Western fashion industry, yet they are reflective of African histories, biographies, and inspirations. I end with an analysis of dress innovation as a form of personal expression, by an innovator inspired by her childhood memories of Africa and by her life in Africa's transcolonial diaspora.

Designer Sakina M'sa uses fashion to evoke very personal aspects of her own experience as an African woman in France. M'sa was born and raised in the Union of the Comoros, an archipelago of four islands in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Mozambique. Her family moved to France when she was seven.²⁶ The sense of dislocation from the place and the people of her childhood instilled in M'sa a desire to reconnect with her heritage, a quest that is reflected in her work. M'sa's unconventional approach to fashion design owes as much to her youth in Marseilles as to her childhood in the Comoros. As a teenager in Marseilles during the 1980s, M'sa embraced the urban youth culture of the era, adopting punk style, with its emphasis on a worn, handmade, anti-materialist aesthetic.²⁷ She also studied art, and developed a fascination with clothing as a medium that enabled her to combine her interests in poetry, music, and visual arts. She established her brand Sakina in Paris in 1992, often engaging in projects that are as much social action as design.

In 2010, M'sa inaugurated the Blue Line, which features clothing made of recycled fabrics in a single color: the vibrant blue that is associated with the coveralls worn by municipal workers, construction crews, and laborers of all kinds. M'sa has described the Blue Line in social and aesthetic terms, as an "homage to these men of the shadows, these workers, who create light for our society. My father is a worker, and I've always admired this Workers' Blue, which is very close to Yves Klein blue."²⁸ M'sa and

her collaborators cut up overalls, pants, jackets, and shirts, reassembling the pieces to create new garments, now for women, including dresses, coats, and bags.

In 2009, M'sa created a collection that exemplifies the complexities of networks of inspiration. These dresses, which M'sa has referred to as "*Femme Girafe*" ("giraffe woman") style, represent a very personal response to specifically African forms, cultures, and histories.²⁹ M'sa described the dresses as her revision of the characteristic women's attire of the Maasai, an East African ethnic group. The garments, an abstraction based on Maasai women's layers of beads, reflect her desire to "pay homage" to these women in a "sober" manner.³⁰ M'sa's use of the term sober is likely an implicit contrast with other refashionings of Maasai style, such as John Galliano's flamboyant 1997 inventions for the Christian Dior brand—beaded and feathered concoctions that leave much of the body uncovered, accompanied by towering stiletto heels, also beaded.³¹ Galliano's interest in the Maasai likely reflects the high profile of the culture in Western imagination, where the image of the Maasai warrior has long been an object of fascination.³²

Unlike the literalness of Galliano's Maasai style, M'sa's garments transform rows of beaded necklaces into pillows that softly yet dramatically reshape the upper body. M'sa thoroughly transforms her source of inspiration, preserving the beaded necklaces of the Maasai as shapes, creating wholly new forms that allow but do not demand interpretation. M'sa has no direct connection with Maasai womanhood, beyond also being an East African woman, yet she draws the Maasai into her own identity as an African woman, and into her work as an African fashion designer. South-south inspiration is in this instance also a search for personal connections and shared histories.

<http://www.noticketforfashionshows.com/2011/10/recyclage-bleu-de-travail-sakina-msa/>.

²⁹ Interview, Paris, 14 December 2009.

²⁶ Interview, Niamey, 1 November 2009.

²⁷ See, for example, Breward's characterization of punk fashion as "resolutely anti-fashion." Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 225.

²⁸ M'sa refers to the color associated with French artist Yves Klein, whose mid-twentieth-century monochromatic canvases featured a luminous blue that he later used in other projects as well, including his famous (in some circles, infamous) paintings created using nude women as brushes. "Sakina M'sa: le Bleu de Travail devient Haute Couture," *No Ticket for Fashion Shows*, 18 October 2011,

³⁰ Interview, Niamey, 1 November 2009.

³¹ Rovine, *African Fashion, Global Style*, 101.

³² This fascination is addressed through the lens of visual culture in Sidney Kasfir's *African Art and the Colonial Encounter: Inventing a Global Commodity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). Kasfir documents the roots of the European idealization of the Maasai and related ethnic groups in the British colonial era. See also: Neal Sobania, "But Where Are the Cattle? Popular Images of Maasai and Zulu across the Twentieth Century," *Visual Anthropology* 15 #3-4 (2002): 313-346.

The giraffe dresses also evoke south-south inspirations from a different direction. The dresses echo a collection created by Japanese designer Rei Kawakubo for her brand Comme des Garçons. The Spring/Summer 1997 collection is called “Dress Meets Body Meets Dress,” or more informally the “lumps and bumps” collection. The nylon dresses incorporate down-filled pillows stitched into a thin sheath worn beneath the dress. This work has been interpreted as a critique of the fashion trends of the 1980s, which emphasized healthy, strong bodies.³³ Comme des Garçons’ references are broad and highly theorized, while the designer’s own biography is emphatically absent--Kawakubo rarely provides any information about her design process or her sources of inspiration. M’Sa’s *Femme Girafe* dresses were in a sense made possible by this practice of fashion, yet her work emerges from a drive to express her identity and directly engage with communities. Thus, these dresses might be viewed as the products of multilayered transcolonial inspirations and contaminations, from the Comoros to Marseilles, on to Tanzania and Japan, all assembled in the world’s ostensible fashion center, Paris.

To draw all of these threads together, I return to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s conception of the cosmopolitan: the resident of multiple worlds, connecting those worlds through processes of contamination out of which emerge new, productive forms that reflect changing contexts. We recall that Appiah employed clothing to parody the popular image of the cosmopolitan, imagined as a “Comme des Garçons-clad sophisticate,” the opposite of the “ruddy-faced farmer in workman’s overalls” who represents the non-cosmopolitan provincial.³⁴ Sakina M’Sa, whose work finds inspiration in both laborers’ overalls and Comme des Garçons, exemplifies Appiah’s vision of the cosmopolitan not as an enforcer of hierarchy but as an agent of contamination, generating cultural expressions by spreading ideas and images.

³³ Francesca Granata, “The Bakhtinian Grotesque in Fashion at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century” (PhD Thesis, Central Saint Martin’s School of Art and Design, University of the Arts London, 2010), 93.

³⁴ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, xiii.