

AFRICAN FASHION

GLOBAL STYLE

Histories, Innovations, and Ideas You Can Wear

Victoria L. Rovine



African Fashion, **Global Style**

HISTORIES, INNOVATIONS, AND IDEAS YOU CAN WEAR



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When I embarked on this project, I could not have imagined that it would lead in so many directions. Fashion turns out to be a topic that inspires enthusiastic responses in people everywhere. Whether they dress with great care or not, people feel strongly about clothing as a marker of identity, taste, and cultural convention (as well as escape from convention). Along with their opinions about fashion, which were usually delivered with a passion that indicated this was a subject that mattered to them, people expressed surprise at the notion of scholarly research on a subject that appeared to be so self-evident, so ephemeral, lacking the seriousness of purpose that generally defines research in the fine arts. Indeed, the subject just seemed to them to be too much fun to be hard work—friends, colleagues, and others often congratulated me on selecting a topic that enabled me to attend

fashion shows, socialize with the chic denizens of the fashion world, and presumably, to wear this fashion myself. They were correct on two counts (despite my admiration for the clothing, I know my sartorial limits!)—I took immense pleasure in the events and people that populate this book. However, I also enjoyed discovering the great complexity and seriousness of African fashion design; it has been a delight to work with designers who use clothing to engage with or reflect on cultural complexities. I hope that this work will encourage much more attention to a medium that exemplifies African creativity and sophistication.

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How lucky can you get?



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African Fashion, Global Style

We've discovered that the most profound thing you can do with clothing is storytelling. Structurally, clothing cutting is interesting but it has a limit.

—Ziemek Pater, *fashion designer, Johannesburg, 29 July 2005*

Ideas You Can Wear

—*Tailor's shop sign, Accra, 2002; see Figure 0.1*

Introduction

FASHION MATTERS

African fashion tells stories. Nigerian fashion designer Amaka Osakwe's Spring/Summer 2012 line of clothing illuminates this commingling of fashion and narrative, offering a vivid and complicated starting point for this exploration of fashion from Africa. In just under three minutes, a video created to promote Osakwe's Maki Oh brand uses clothing to tell a provocative story about an African location and culture. The video is a wordless montage of fragmented, grainy images that centers on a group of women wearing Maki Oh designs. The handheld camera weaves around the women, catching glimpses of their clothing as they enter and leave the frame, checking their makeup or talking on cell phones, illuminated by light reflected off a compact mirror or a car window. They wear clinging velvet dresses, diaphanous white shirts, flowing organza skirts, and shorts adorned with bold patterns in blue and white. The setting does not immediately evoke a specific location: a city at night with apartment blocks and fences lit by the headlights of passing cars; it could be anywhere.

The designs are linked to specific African locations and cultures by a variety of means, textual as well as visual. The promotional materials that accompanied the collection, via the brand's website and press interviews with the designer, connect the garments to a specific urban African milieu, describing the clothing line as "Maki Oh's fictional trip into the world of metropolitan African seduction: into the world of the Lagos 'Reds'."¹ "Reds," as the video makes apparent, are prostitutes who ply their trade on the streets of Lagos, one of Africa's largest cities.

The clothing worn by the Reds subtly projects place and culture conveyed through two layers of sartorial references, one literal and one conceptual. First, the literal: a woman wears shorts made of a blue and white patterned fabric, readily recognizable as *adire*, a Yoruba resist-dyed textile. Along with the shorts, she wears a sheer white top that incorporates fibrous strands of a loofah sponge sewn

FIGURE 0.1. Ideas You Can Wear, Tailor's Shop Sign, Accra, Ghana, 2002. Photograph by author.



into horizontal bands, described as Maki Oh's "customary incorporation of an indigenous feature, in this case, the Nigerian local sponge" (Figure 0.2).² In interviews, Osakwe described her desire to preserve techniques and styles through these adaptations: "It's my only way of keeping my heritage alive, by making it relevant."³ These stylistic references to African forms, a consistent element of Maki Oh designs, represent one manifestation of African fashion design.

Along with these explicit sources of inspiration, Osakwe alludes to Africa indirectly, creating forms that require interpretation of historical or cultural references. Several of the dresses in the collection exemplify this complex invocation of Africa. The tight-fitting garments, created in both black and white hues,



FIGURE 0.2. Maki Oh, designed by Amaka Osakwe, Africa Fashion Week, Johannesburg, 2011. Photograph © SDR Photo, courtesy of Simon Deiner.

are adorned with geometric cutouts made of gauzy chiffon fabric. Osakwe cites African inspiration, yet rather than a direct connection, her references are filtered through the sensibility of French primitivism. The dresses were inspired by Henri Matisse's translation of African masks and figures into two-dimensional

geometries; they remake the body into flat symmetrical planes of color and transparency. The designs were also inspired by another aspect of Matisse's engagement with Africa: his depictions of North African women in languid poses. These odalisques are, like the Reds, emblems of "African allure and the hedonism of youth."⁴

Osakwe's career, like her sources of inspiration, has been wide-ranging; she is based in Lagos, trained in England, and is represented by a New York agent.⁵ Among the sources of inspiration Osakwe credits for her other collections are Cy Twombly, Wangechi Mutu, the films of Jacques Tati, and the body adornment associated with a girls' initiation ceremony in eastern Ghana. Her work expresses eclecticism and a deliberately global reach in combination with a commitment to creating garments that make a distinctly African contribution to global fashion markets. Maki Oh clothing's density of references, some visible and others revealed through interpretation, make the brand an ideal point from which to begin this exploration of Africa's many manifestations as fashion. Moving between the ateliers of Yoruba indigo dyers, Matisse's African art collection, the work of Mutu and Twombly, and the edges of Lagos nightlife, Amaka Osakwe creates fashion that is African in surprising ways, slipping the constraints of the category to expand its possibilities. Other such dress inventions abound in the field of African fashion design, a medium that thrives at the fertile intersection of dress, stories, and African cultures.

* * *

In designers' boutiques and ateliers, in the seats alongside fashion runways, and in conversations wherever people gather, dress is a primary expression both of deeply rooted cultural identities and, often simultaneously, of the creativity by which conventions are constantly transformed. The flexibility of dress styles—the quality by which clothing is transformed into fashion—makes this medium particularly well suited to storytelling. The settings for fashion's stories range from street corner boutiques with a single sewing machine to multinational brands that reach global markets. In all of its variety, fashion has never been confined to elites or to the realm of specialists; despite its reputation for exclusivity, fashion's impact is exceptionally democratic. Displayed on streets and in countless media outlets, recorded in family photographs as well as in fashion photography and videos, inventive styles of dress are manifested in a wide range of contexts. Recognizing fashion in all of these locations requires loosening conventional definitions of the term, broadening our view to encompass markets based outside Europe and North America, and looking beyond the branding systems that characterize those markets.

Africa's fashion production, past and present, tells vivid stories about local histories and global networks of goods and images. These garments reveal profound

ideas—ideas that can be worn—about changing conceptions of tradition, modernity, and the balance of these broad categories in contemporary cultures. The continent's fashion manifestations include local dress innovations that reflect global trends, African designers like Amaka Osakwe whose work circulates in international fashion markets, and non-African designers' adaptations of African styles. In addition, indigenous fashion systems have a long history in Africa. These dress innovations provide insights into networks of influence and inspiration that are often global in their reach. The chapters that follow introduce a wide range of fashion innovations that illuminate Africa's contributions to fashion markets. Not all of the creators of these garments identify themselves as fashion designers, yet all use clothing as their artistic medium. Some of their innovations are deliberately subtle, remaining within the bounds of long-standing practice while still bringing something new to those conventions. Others make dramatic statements, creating garments that emphatically mark distance from conventional styles of dress.

Africa's role as both active participant and source of inspiration in global fashion markets provides insights into routes of cross-cultural influence and exchange. Garments, markets, and designers illuminate the processes by which these influences are absorbed and adapted into new cultural contexts; their original connotations are preserved or obscured as they acquire new meanings that revise or simply replace previous associations. Tracing these migrations of forms and meanings through the work of specific artists and dress styles elucidates clothing innovators' use of attire to blend precedent with new sources of inspiration. These stories of Africa's engagement with fashion design are manifested in works of art that make powerful aesthetic statements and yield rich cultural insights.

My analysis brings a highly visible element of African material culture fully into the discourse that animates African art historical studies, and in particular into the burgeoning subfield of modern and contemporary African art history. Fashion studies, the second field most directly engaged here, is also challenged and expanded by this research, which turns sustained attention both to an under-represented fashion-producing region and to genres of dress innovation that have not previously been treated as fashion. By addressing an artistic medium that bridges and expands two fields, my investigation illuminates both. The study of African artistic expression is incomplete without attention to fashion, one of its most visible and widely practiced manifestations.

Designers and Themes

Through the work of a diverse group of designers, this exploration of African fashion's many manifestations elucidates broad themes, including the relationship between African and Western fashion worlds (and in some instances the blurring or erasure of the distinction between them); the strategies designers employ