



The fabric of Africanity

Tracing the global threads of authenticity

Nina Sylvanus

University of California Los Angeles, USA

Abstract

This article explores the global circulation of a commodity – African wax-prints, manufactured since the late 19th century in Europe for the West African market and increasingly reproduced today in China – by way of focusing on the idea of the ‘authentically African’. Exploring the biography of wax fabric, this article seeks to cross-examine what serves as a parameter of authenticity, both in international markets, in which the African signifier appears as a source of the renewal of identity, and in Africa, where wax fabric’s integration into local structures of consumption as a status symbol is informed by the principles of simulation and imitation. I suggest that the notion of ‘Africanity’ is a conceptual construction whose validation depends more on the observer’s gaze than on the object of that gaze in the context of western consumption practices. I propose that the trajectory of wax-cloth, not only in Africa, but also in international markets, is based on the principle of reproduction and imitation which determines the notion of authenticity.

Key Words

Africa • authenticity • commodities • consumption • cultural industries • identity • textiles

INTRODUCTION

Ceci n’est pas une pipe by Margritte is important for understanding my work. You know how his piece presents a pipe and then says it is not a pipe. You can’t smoke it. Sometimes people confuse representation for what it represents. But they are not that physical thing, they don’t exist in the world in that way. So if you see a woman walking down a road and she’s wearing African cloth, you might think – now there’s African-ness, true Africanity. But that cloth, those clothes, are not African-ness. (Yinka Shonibare, interviewed in 1996 by Nancy Hynes; see Hynes, 2001: 62)

While this article does not examine the art of the London-based Yoruba artist Yinka Shonibare, this quotation offers a compelling window into the dynamics of cultural authenticity, commodity circulation and global processes. By challenging conventional categories of place, space and time, the artist argues that European-produced wax-print does not any less represent African-ness than the Victorian corset dress represents Englishness.¹ Drawing on the work of Barthes, Baudrillard and Derrida, who have emphasized the constructivist nature of social categories and systems of signification, post-colonial artist Shonibare plays with the classical theme of the signifier and the signified, the position of subalternity, the notion of disenchanted space and master narratives. As Mudimbe (1988) has pointed out in *The Invention of Africa*, and, as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have equally underlined, Africa is as much a construct of European fantasies as Europe itself is the result of an epistemological, historically informed construct (Chakrabarty, 2000; Dadi and Hassan, 2002). Anthropological literature presents an entangled material culture approach (Thomas, 1991) in which the objects circulating between distinct geographical places appear as equally constructed in their nature and represent hybrid forms of colonial and post-colonial contact. What this article attempts to accomplish is not so much to deconstruct the ideological assumptions of Africa and Europe by playing with the Africanizing effects of wax cloth; it is rather to examine the biography (Kopytoff, 1986) of wax fabric in its multiple facets. By illuminating its various trajectories across different spheres of exchange, both in space and time, which have determined the fabric's value, we attempt to resituate the notion of authenticity in a context of simulation and simulacra as suggested by Baudrillard (1981). Indeed, the 19th-century introduction of wax-print into West Africa as industrialized imitations of Javanese batik cottons compellingly illustrates this process. The introduction or the invention of the European produced wax fabric for the West African market has a long history of imitation and trade, linking Africa to Europe and Asia. Numerous textile imitations, notably Indian and Manchester cottons, have circulated since the 18th century on these trading routes. The perfectly imitated copy combined with some quality adjustments and adaptation to local aesthetics becomes the parameter of evaluation that allowed the fabric to enter the sphere of the authentic. The processes of adaptation and localization in which the fabric's geographic origin is transcended – analyzed in the second part of this article – reveals the complex and elaborated ways in which wax-prints are integrated into African consumption structures to become African. Imported objects are inserted into a local process and a set of practices of social reproduction and thus culturally assimilated by those who actually use them. In the past, globally produced African fabrics could only be purchased in Africa, while today they have traveled to the African diasporas and international markets as embedded objects of Africanity. In this sense, this article argues against Shonibare's perception of 'African-ness'; the assimilation of European-produced fabrics into African consumption structures and identity constitution can in fact be compared to East Indian calicoes: 'the furnishing of homes with delicate Chinaware [during the reign of William and Mary, that] had become so integral to English taste that they came to represent "Englishness" more than they did "otherness"' (Steiner, 1994: 128).

Indeed, European-produced wax fabric came to best represent West African taste with its subtle combination of fitting to quality standards, local dress practices and systems of representation and status. European-produced African fabric became itself subject to

imitation. Since the late 1990s, Shanghai-based textile firms have started to simulate the characteristics of European wax-prints and have introduced cheap copies to the African market, blurring local hierarchies of value and representation. Similarly, imitations of wax fabrics have entered the African-American market. The process of simulation that authenticates the fabric for African-American consumers as being real is based on the principle of reproducing the fabric's glossy effects and other characteristics largely unappreciated in West Africa. The first section of this article will explore some of these contradictions and examine in what ways these fabrics are integrated and reinterpreted by western cultural industries, while the second section examines the entangled threads of the commodity at stake to try and tease out the ironies of global processes.

THE RENEWAL OF THE 'AFRICAN' STEREOTYPE BY THE CULTURAL INDUSTRY: WAX-PRINTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET

Although Africa is relegated to the margins of globalization's economic dynamics, we are nevertheless witnessing the emergence of a phenomenon directly linked to these processes. In this respect, Africa constitutes a crucial stake when considered as a source of creation, of diffusion and of commercial valorization in a burgeoning market of cultural 'regeneration' (Amselle, 2001; Busca, 2000). This phenomenon plays a part in the formation of a rising niche market of a new cultural economy.

The market for collectors of African art (see Steiner, 1994), up to now the prerogative of New York or Parisian galleries, is beginning to open up with the appearance of a network of 'ethnic boutiques', offering objects of artisanal quality and African exoticism to an extended western clientele. This network is an addition to traditional art and design markets and appears as a lucrative alternative for mid-level income consumers. The objects sold in this emerging niche market convey referents based on cultural difference and are often part of what Amselle calls an 'afro-kitsch' repertoire (Amselle, 2002). While the lower-end objects are at once commercialized by African traders, as described by Stoller (2002) in the case of New York City, and in specialized shops, the more refined and aesthetically compelling objects are reviewed by professionals in the design, fashion and decorative arts world² to fit the needs of cosmopolitan consumers. In regard to this later category, whether it concerns art, artisanry, fashion or cosmetics, what these repurposed objects have in common is the reappropriation of an African signifier, that is to say, the drawing on cultural difference and essentialism to innovate product design and marketing strategies. This global market of the consumption of cultures reacts to the cultures of consumption by creating and positioning the 'African' as a source of renewal. In such markets, Africa, by virtue of its reinvented 'culture', becomes an essential stratum in the creation of identity – as much by its music and its fabrics as by its masks and shea butter cosmetic products.

Because culture is a domain within which the world economy is manifested, Africa finds itself put on stage as an important actor and supplier of signifiers. Despite diverse institutional support, such as that of UNESCO, or *Afrique en Creation*,³ African actors do not yet control economic flows, nor chains of added value. The conditions of production and access to global markets risk becoming a serious impediment to the development of an endogenous economy made up of African industries and cultural enterprises. As long as the process of 'labeling'⁴ comes to be founded on the notion of cultural difference as exchange value, and as long as this notion implies an essentializing definition of

culture, evaluative criteria will remain under the control of western structures of creation, diffusion and commercialization.

Designing the 'authentically African' object

In Paris, where part of the research for this article was conducted, the organization of this emerging niche market is articulated around major product lines and established through distribution networks such as *Galleries Lafayette*, *Printemps Maison* and specialized shops. The main product lines include clothing, designed around fabrics such as wax-prints, *bogolan* and *kente* fabric, furniture, art craft, cosmetics and jewelry. These objects, arrayed in a variety of collections and developed for an entirely western market, while marketed as 'African' are seldom used by Africans themselves. Parts of these objects are constituted by what I call 'reframed commodities',⁵ i.e. the object's original use has been altered to fit new functions. These objects, while generating new functions, remain, however, attached to the commodity's kitsch dimensions drawing on the notion of the exotic. In this category, where the cultural registers were initially shaped by economic considerations, we find a diversity of manufactured objects as surprising and astonishing as Islamic prayer mats and plastic kettles. While the experienced West Africa traveler can easily identify these two ordinary objects, the inexperienced consumer remains in the dark in regard to what these items really represent.

In 2002, colorful plastic prayer mats were retailed in several stylish Parisian boutiques. They were sold in different sizes and marketed as bath mats. Each color variety was labeled according to a specific name and the consumer could choose among the *Tissoubar* mat, the *Takossane* mat, the *Timiss* mat, the *Guéj* mat, and the *Souba* mat. The exotic designations of these mats proved to be appealing to the western customer, unaware that his/her bath mat was in fact named after the Wolof (Senegal) names of the five Moslem prayers, something that had proved to be a successful marketing strategy. Indeed, the requalification of the object occurs by inventing a name that disregards the boundary between the sacred and the profane. Colorful plastic kettles provide a similar example: manufactured in Asia for the West African market, they are used in the context of Islamic ablutions. The plastic kettle replaced the usual metal kettles, which had proven unsuitable for these ritual washings because when they were left outdoors the sun would heat the kettle's water and people would inadvertently burn themselves when washing and cleaning. As a result, the introduction of the Asian-produced plastic kettle was an immediate success in Muslim West Africa. Plastic kettles, when they are not used as watering-cans, represent a paradox similar to that of the prayer mat. The western buyer is drawn to the object's chromatic kitsch dimensions and largely ignores the container's cultural content, attributed in the production process. The African etiquette alone appears as sufficient evidence of the object's authentic character.

In this respect, communication and marketing in this section of the market are becoming increasingly professionalized. A clear example concerns the developing 'trend agencies' that seek continuously to innovate and renew their offerings, and whose prescriptions are used as a reference guide for the cultural industries, and notably fashion designers.⁶ African fabrics take on a significant place in this new economy, in particular wax-prints desired as much for their 'African' patterns and colors as for their malleable applications in fashion clothing and in furnishing, where they are used for duvet and cushion covers, purses, wallets, toilet bags, scarves, dresses and so on. In West Africa,

wax cloth is sold in the standard length of 12 yards. It is the most worn and the most valued fabric in West Africa, but it is also the most imitated. Its principal characteristic – a unique combination of pattern and color – constitutes the basis for a renewable repertoire. As such, a wax-print represents much more than a mere piece of fabric; it embodies several levels of significance which will be examined in more depth in the next section. Conversely, the wax-prints sold in Parisian boutiques to western consumers in the form of clothes, furniture or accessories were reviewed by a set of ‘cultural experts’, designers and trend-setters who make regular trips to Africa in search of new ideas and sources of inspiration. By way of catering to the needs of the cosmopolitan consumer in search of identity, these experts deprive the objects of their African character while simultaneously marketing their African nature. What defines authenticity in this case lies in the observer’s gaze and not in the object itself. As in world music, the sale of wax-prints in international markets constitutes a mixture of different forms in which Africa plays only a peripheral part. African signifiers, conveyed in wax fabric, are carefully re-examined and adjusted by a set of experts and designers who suggest modifications that adjust to the western market. The latter functions like a ‘cultural supermarket’ (Gordon, 2000) in which the western consumer chooses from a rich display that ranges from world music, to world food, to different modes of being, to furnishing a life-world by composing different forms and objects. The choice offered within the framework of the cultural supermarket allows the consumer to play with various cultural features, as well as to mix them. The consumer, however, respects the principles of the ‘cut and mix’ culture (Friedman, 2000), principles which conform to local ways of life. Underlying the culture market and the process of identification it induces is a conception of the world that assumes the purity of cultural roots. Thus, ‘cultural experts’ play with the concept of origin, which in itself conceals the idea of culture as essence. In this way, a handbag can be classified as ‘African’. Only what the western gaze authenticates as such enables the circulation of the object outside of Africa and its integration into the western market. While drawing from the repertoire of Africa that which is transformable to an object of western consumption, the African continent is relegated to the status of a periphery that acts as a regenerative principal for the center. Cosmopolitan consumerism actively participates in this process. As alluded to earlier, the African signifier appears as a source of renewal in cosmopolitan self-construction. Friedman identifies the contemporary cosmopolitan identity as ‘betwixt and between without being liminal’ and as ‘shifting, participating in many worlds, without becoming part of them’ (Friedman, 1994: 204). This self-identified status position draws on the notion of hybridity. The Parisian ‘Bobo’⁷ – the *bourgeois bohemian* – is a perfect example of cosmopolitan identity formation to which the aforementioned ‘African’ objects appeal. Bobos are continuously in search of distinctive lifestyles that are in part based on the consumption of ‘authentic’ objects they consider to symbolize distinctive cultural expressions. In line with the cultural supermarket principle, a Bobo decorates his life with distinguishing objects that he mixes and arranges according to his hybrid view of the world.

The fabric of Africity appears to cosmopolitan consumers as a form of identity renewal in which actors of the cultural economy play an important part in simulating the authenticity of the object, one that relates to the notion of origin while simultaneously transforming the object’s initial function. In the case of African-American textile consumption practices, where the use is hardly altered compared to Bobo

consumption, the simulation of some of the fabric's specific aspects appears as important as its place of fabrication, as illustrated in the work of Stoller (2002) and Rabine (2002). Stoller points out the central role of simulacra in contemporary economic social contexts in his analysis of African-American marketing strategies in New York City. Drawing on Baudrillard's work (1981), Stoller conceptualizes the commercial reproduction of African items, notably Ghanaian *kente* cloth – considered a symbol of pan-Africanism – intended for African-American consumers in New York City. In this context, he argues that processes of identification and representation are often based on simulation, that very representation of the real that becomes even more real than the model it refers to. Indeed, in tracing the juxtaposed trajectory of *kente* cloth, Stoller explains the irony of the commodity's entangled history. Ghanaian *kente* cloth, traditionally produced in Ghana and marketed by African traders in New York City, becomes reproduced by Asian textile manufacturers in New Jersey. In response to this competition, Ghanaian manufacturers put out a superior *kente* reproduction, which they sold on the market at a lesser price than the Asian imitation. New Jersey-based Asian manufacturers, in response, would purchase the Ghanaian reproductions from African traders in New York City and have them customized into *kente* caps in New York City-based Korean sweatshops. In return, African traders would purchase these caps to resell them to their African-American customers who, in the context of *kente* cap consumption, appear to care less about the fabric's 'authentic' origin than about the simulation of the real, even if that reality is invented.

Similarly, Rabine engages in the ironies of globalization and simulation in her study of the circulation of African fabric. She examines how Senegalese-produced fancy-cloth,⁸ in this case reproductions of 'traditional' local textiles and wax-prints, appeal to African-American consumers in New York City, Philadelphia and Los Angeles. While the Senegalese-produced cloth benefits from a special status of 'African' authenticity in the United States, these fabrics are not used in Senegal because they do not appeal to local consumer taste. As Rabine explains, US market-intended fabric patterns are smaller in size, glossy in appearance and draw heavily on a mythically inspired symbolism that appeals to the consumer in search of African cultural heritage, but little, if at all, to the West African consumer. African-American consumption of fancy and *kente* cloth imitations, which serve as simulacra to fantasy representations of what Africa means, thereby permits the imitations to become real. These processes of reproduction and simulation lead us to our next section, in which we explore the entangled historical trajectories of the wax-print.

WAX-PRINT'S ENTANGLED GLOBAL THREADS

The forms of simulation and the modes of access to African objects in the international market, be it the case of the African-American consumption sector or the cosmopolitan niche market for Africanity, follows a variety of models. While in some cases the objects are introduced to the market in their original form, they sometimes undergo a series of transformations, redefinitions and repackaging that precede their commercialization. In order to understand this new market of authenticity it is necessary to resituate these 'African objects' in their historicity so as to understand what it is that constitutes them as 'African'. From this biographical perspective, wax-print provides a pertinent example: before becoming 'African', it was 'Euro-Japanese'. In effect, it took more than a century

of circulation and transformation before wax-print penetrated the circuits of the international market and its cultural economy.

The European textile trade appeared in West Africa toward the end of the 15th century.⁹ Prior to this period textiles were already used as a monetary unit, and when European-produced fabrics entered the African market they served – as did firearms and alcohol – as exchange currency in the gold, ivory and slave trades. European merchants adapted their textile products to African consumption by trying to capture the sense of local taste. During the 17th and 18th centuries, European merchants and metropolitan companies began to study different ‘indigenous styles’ (see Steiner, 1985) in order to facilitate the flow of their goods. The French and the English thus competed with one another for the *Indiennes*¹⁰ market-share by adapting the iconography of these fabrics to African aesthetics. In this way, African markets became a commercial interest coveted by European trading houses. European companies operating on a transnational scale, such as the Royal African Company or the Dutch and English East India Companies, acquired hegemonic positions in the structuring of this commerce. Stop-overs on the European trade routes, the forts of the coast of Guinea, were then used as ports for the Dutch fleets of the East India Company. As part of the informal trade in local commodities, the sailors exchanged Indian and Javanese textiles from the East Indies, such as *batik*¹¹ cloth, the ancestor of the wax-print (Nielsen, 1979; Picton, 1995).

From the 17th century onwards *batiks* made their appearance in West Africa. They became more widespread during the 19th century, as suggested by Kroese (1976), when several thousand freed slaves¹² from the Dutch East Indian Army that had served in Java (1831 and 1872) returned to Africa dressed in *batik* cloth. However, wax-print in its current version only appeared towards the end of the 19th century, at the peak of the European textile export to West Africa. Previously, with the invention of the *Javanaise*,¹³ the Dutch had produced industrialized *batiks* for the Dutch East Indian market – present-day Indonesia – where they attempted to undercut the prices of local handmade *batiks*. But the industrialized reproduction process was poor in quality as it left fine lines on the fabric that resulted from the cracking of the wax technique. Largely unappreciated by the Javanese, these signs of imperfection became highly appreciated in West Africa. European producers were forced to conquer new markets in order to avoid the closing of European factories. It is in this context that the commercial trade networks in the Gulf of Guinea offered an opportunity for the establishment of new markets while taking advantage of commercial relations that had already been established since the formation of the ‘spice route’.

The successful transfer of *batik* to the West African market was engendered by a long-term process of adaptation to local demand and aesthetics, which were, in fact, very different from their Javanese equivalents. The fabric had several advantages that were greatly appreciated in the Gulf of Guinea, especially its lightness and softness and its chromatic resistance to the sun and to frequent washing. The distinctive character of the fabric’s texture, differentiating each yard of cloth with its subtle lines and cracks that resulted from the manufacture process, was particularly valued. These important local criteria provided the ground for the wax-print to enter the highly competitive textile market. In a lengthy process of making the fabric appropriate for the requirements of the African market, wax-print’s size was altered, the colors were modified, the flexibility

of the cotton was improved and the Javanese patterns were adapted by incorporating Guinea coast iconographies. The agents of European manufacturers encountered the complexity of African demand and the difficulty to satisfy it. Numerous samples of wax cloth were sent to the Gulf of Guinea and while a small number of designs appealed to African consumers the majority were rejected. The Gold Coast, present-day Ghana, appeared as the first market for the wax-print at the end of the 19th century. European traders, missionaries, and, in particular, the evangelical mission of Basel, contributed significantly to the popularization of these newly adapted fabrics. They were, in fact, distributed through the mission's trade company, the *Basler Handelsgesellschaft*, which was charged to meet the needs of its expatriates and to provide the local population with 'civilized' commodities. It is in this context that missionaries ordered wax-prints in specific colors and patterns according to the area in question and the targeted 'ethnic group'.

For approximately seven decades, the wax market was organized around two geographical poles: a European center of production, and an exclusively African center of consumption. For the Anglophone countries, the distribution of wax-print was primarily in the hands of the United Africa Company, and for the Francophone countries, its French counterpart, the *Compagnie Niger France* – both of which were important subsidiary companies of the multinational Unilever.¹⁴ Produced in Europe, the wax-print could only be purchased in Africa. This commercial relation that linked Europe and West Africa was carried out to the detriment of local textile production in Africa, very much following a center-periphery scenario in which local production is out-competed by foreign imports.

Located in a position of commercial interdependence, these two distinct poles of production and consumption were organized and controlled by a colonial economy and dominated by a global system of unequal exchange. In the beginning, the economic model of the wax-print was very simple: (1) having lost their share of the Asian market, the European factories needed new markets and, in particular, the African colonial market, to make their production profitable; (2) the mechanisms of control of the African market, in the colonial periphery, permitted the control of the textile sector and enabled its receptivity to the new wax fabric; (3) local competition over wax-print was limited to local handicraft production, with which the industrial product was, from the beginning, positioned in a strategy not of substitution, but of complementarity; (4) the networks of diffusion and distribution were organized in such a way that women traders played a significant role in the conception, marketing, and adaptation of the product to the tastes and desires of the African consumer. The creation and the production of new patterns were based primarily on the feedback provided by these women traders, not on a prior European aesthetic expectation of the local market.

From the 1960s, the localization of centers of production shifted under the effect of Unilever's development policy – in response to increased competition, it relocated part of its production to West Africa. At the same time, the emergence of Asian centers of production (especially Pakistani and Hong-Kong Chinese) primarily devoted to the imitation¹⁵ of the European patterns caused the shutdown of many European factories that produced wax-prints. Today, only two factories remain in Europe: Vlisco in the Netherlands and the Chinese-owned A.B.C. in England. The reorganization of the global economy, that is, the fragmentation of the textile market linked to the process of

decentralization, the shift in production to China with the progressive decline of European suppliers, and the development of new entrepreneurial networks, have contributed to new forms of competition, which undermine former hierarchies of value and trade practices, as we shall discuss in the following section. Out of the total number of wax-prints available in the market today, only 10 per cent are produced in Europe. Yet, the 90 per cent extra-European market share draws on the same iconographic repertoire as the European prints, which means they are copied and sold at a cheaper price. Chinese-produced simulacra of the European originals have become commonplace in African markets. Simulating the real, these textiles might be perceived, according to Taussig's perception of Benjamin's mimetic faculty, as 'the wonder of mimesis [that] lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original' (Taussig, 1993: xiii). While the origin of the fabric does not determine the object's value or ability to be considered or identified as African, it is the local complexity of hierarchic consumption structures and practices that does not allow the Chinese copies to achieve the status of the 'authentically African'. Because these imitations do not yet fulfill the conditions of West African consumers' demands, not, at least, in the 'high-end' market in which European-produced wax-prints are located, they cannot yet reproduce that which characterizes authentic African fabric.

How the wax-print became 'African'

The success of European-produced wax-print, as I suggested earlier, does not reside in the mere specialization of a European industry in an African market. It is the complex processes of localization in which this fabric was inserted into a set of local practices and cultural strategies that allowed for its assimilation within African consumption structures. The role of African market women in this process appears as fundamental. Indeed, during the early colonial period, women had benefited from male labor recruitment to position themselves as the intermediaries between European agents and local businessmen. Since the late 19th century, coastal traders, especially Ga and Mina women, have dominated the distribution networks of European-manufactured commodities, and notably textiles, which were considered luxuries. As intermediaries between the coast and the hinterland, they had taken over the role of marketing agents for European trading companies, and they carefully promoted new consumer desires by providing both markets with western goods (Cordonnier, 1987; Robertson, 1984). While Ga women traders organized early wax cloth distribution in Accra, the Gold Coast's neighbor, Togo, disposed of an equally dynamic women trader scene in Lomé. Indeed, it is in connection with these women's ability to promote the newly emerging wax-prints that these fabrics made their way into local consumption structures. In the 1950s, Togo's 'Nana-Benz'¹⁶ held monopoly power over the distribution of European-produced textiles throughout the region, controlling cloth distribution from the wholesale level to the retailer. This distribution network through which the wax fabric passes from the moment it leaves the factory relies on a very simple pyramidal structure.¹⁷ This structure is subdivided and horizontally segmented according to geographical, market, and product criteria. The organization and animation of this network are similar to the standard operations of any chain of added value. However, what seems at first sight to be a banal commercial network consists, in fact, of the intersection of two networks: the cloth's diffusion and distribution network and the very complex network through

which the wax-print's significance is generated and transformed. Between leaving the factory and being offered through the commercial network to the consumer, wax-print undergoes a series of symbolic transformations. While escaping the market economy of the wax-print, this transformative network is vital to the cloth's value and serves as a local leverage point in the context of the informal economy. Each link of the chain of distribution brings various actors into play, in particular, women. Not resigned to being mere wholesalers, local wholesale dealers or retailers, they also take charge of providing accommodations and arranging transit, logistics, support and finance to their customers, as well as overseeing the coherence and adaptability of the commercial network. They are indeed the backbone of the organization of the local consumption structure. From the formation of this economic microcosm, which is animated by the actresses of the wax-print market, to the multiplicity of the forms of reappropriation, as for instance the institutional uses of wax,¹⁸ we observe a strategy of consumption and a phenomenon of requalification. These phenomena can only be grasped by the specific socio-cultural context that nourishes them. This context constitutes both the starting and ending points of a process of social transformation.

The success of wax fabric – and thus its local translation – relies in part in its product marketing, which is organized in different female networks. It also depends on the fact that the wax-print arrives on the spot as a raw material, thus providing the necessary space for the enactment of local logics of usage, interpretation and meaning attribution. The requalification process of wax-print in West African culture consists of the ascription to the fabric of a series of local significances, permitting its integration into various local strategies of consumption. Indeed, once the cloth leaves the warehouse and arrives on the market, a name is allotted to it to increase its market potential. These names operate as facilitators to penetrate people's life-spaces and local structures of identification. The naming process transcends the fabric's status as a simple object of consumption within a commercial framework. These names reflect or translate a reinterpretation of the European design patterns: some fabrics carry complete sentences as names, which can be used as a specialized language. In the context of polygamous relations, these idioms may be used among women of the same age group, who are competing for potential husbands, or among competing co-wives, who live in the same household. The wax-prints called 'The eye of my rival' and 'When my rival sees it [the wax-print], she will throw herself into the river' illustrate this practice. While these fabrics can be used in the context of amorous competition, they are also deployed as fashionable expressions that attest to a woman's financial capacity to participate in changing sartorial styles. Wax-prints become special commodities in their capacity to 'clothe' a person with a specific social identity.

Sometimes, the names of wax-prints are inspired by foreign TV series such as the American 'Dallas' or the South American telenovela 'Marie Mare': the initial signifier is requalified by a different local sense. As suggested by Katz and Liebes (1991), televisual flows are interpreted in different countries according to local considerations. These naming processes, which for the most part relate to contemporary events, allow the fabric's carrier not only to 'respond' to current events or to connect to a particular aspect of global TV culture but also to craft sartorial fashions. The appearance and presentation of the clothed body that the wearing of wax cloth conveys to the fullest draws upon evocative names. The lifespan of a name is unpredictable. There are names that come

into being and disappear at once while others enter the category of bestsellers. A respectable woman's wardrobe must include several of these classic wax-prints.

The patterns of these European-produced fabrics are created in an interactive dynamic with the African market and they are constantly being adapted to shifting tastes. Despite the designer's access to a large lexical base and to the field of semantic connections, which the wax's repertoire offers, the designers are often mistaken in their imagining of African taste. The success of a pattern depends on several complex factors. Indeed, the majority of the original designs that refer to western designs do not become 'best-sellers'. On the other hand, when one examines the symbols, which intervene in the interpretation of the designs, one realizes that the values of reference often remain in the western world. Take, as an example, the wax-print 'If you leave, I leave', on which is depicted a cage from which two birds are escaping. The interpretation of the patterns is not only determined by a semantic connection between the wax-print's design and its allotted name. Indeed, several factors, which result from daily concerns and realities of the consumer, have to be considered. The pattern's figurative and symbolic repertoire constitutes a common stock between Europe and Africa. In the case of the wax-print 'If you leave, I leave', which relates to the topic of conjugal fidelity, we postulate that the symbolic space to which the print refers is a Judeo-Christian system of representation, and thus provides room for a process of acculturation.

Wax, and particularly Dutch-produced wax-prints, have been able to achieve a long-lasting presence in West Africa. The latter has inserted itself into the ritual cycle of a person's social life. It has become the most worn and valorized fabric, clearly expressed in its high cost. Most women desire to possess the greatest amount of wax fabric not only to demonstrate their good taste, but also to identify the person socially. In this context of hierarchization, wax-print also plays a significant role in the social practice of gift exchange. As an object of high social value it lends itself particularly well to practices like reciprocal exchange. A fiancé is expected to offer numerous wax-prints to his future wife, and wax cloth is an obligatory part of the dowry. By the same token, the guests of a marriage ceremony ought to offer wax-prints to the bride. In the logic of these systems of reciprocity, the person to whom one had offered wax is then, in return, required to contribute wax-prints to the donor's wedding ceremony. In addition, the wearing of wax-print at funerals is practically obligatory: family members and close friends of the deceased distinguish themselves by dressing uniformly. Chinese-produced wax-prints have not yet entered this space, in part because the imitation process has not yet been able to perfectly simulate Dutch-print quality.

The degree to which objects are desired, measured by how much others are willing to pay, constitutes an object's economic value and its status or prestige. As an object of desire it exists in a web of social relations that extends the measure of individual desire to broader strategies of identification and meaning constitution. As suggested by Graeber (2002), the value of an object is not static, as it is placed in a larger code of meaning. In Togo and other parts of West Africa, wax-prints are part of a set of meanings and social practices that have located this object with distinct social, cultural and economic value. The complex 'nostrification' (Elwert, 2000) processes that wax cloth has undergone for over a century in West Africa attests to its authentic African character and objects Shonibare's conception of 'African-ness'. The fabric simultaneously loses and integrates its twofold foreign 'origins' – Javanese and European – as a result of the

transformation processes through which initial signifiers are reconfigured into new signifiers, thereby transcending the notion of the origins.

The cultural biography of wax-print, the sources of difference and of the identity formations of which it is the stake, the dynamics of requalification it provokes, and the processes of legitimization and of social control that it induces, are all properties of the framework of West African consumption practices, themselves aspects of more encompassing life-worlds.

CONCLUSION: THE FORMATION OF A RECOGNIZED SIGNIFIER

Wax-print is integrated into a particular system, and thus has its own rationality. Within the framework of this system, functioning now for over 100 years, wax-print behaves at times as an 'African' object, belonging to an 'African repertoire', at other times as a 'hybrid' object of exotica, requalified by cultural experts to fit to the demand of western consumption. Wax fabric's arrival in Africa from Europe via Asia is transformed by a commercial network, which acts above all to structure the product's meaning. Wax-cloth is integrated and taken up in a set of transformational units that orchestrate its reframing within the context of local meanings prior to its return to Europe. Traversing this trajectory, the wax will have accumulated different layers of significance, according to the cultural milieus it has crossed. Wax-print's recuperation and integration to the new cultural economy, as a constitutive aspect of globalization, was only possible because the western market considered wax an authentic African object, an uncontested symbol of the 'black continent's' cultural identity. In this case, the notion of authenticity is a conceptual construction whose validation depends more on the observer's gaze than on the object of that gaze. There are thus two instances of authentication: on the one hand, an imaginary and reflexive production which reveals a fantasmatic nature (Warnier, 1996), and on the other hand, the expression of the object's functional characteristics, whose authenticity depends, from this point of view, not on the gaze to which it is subject, nor on its origin, but rather on its use – to be more precise, on the process of integration and valorization that underlies its use.

By allotting an 'African' stamp to it, the western actors produce an 'Africanity' that responds above all by 'fixing' an identity and thus an expectation. The consumption of this Africanity corresponds to a need for 'triangulation' – the necessary or required presence of a third element in order to reconstruct an identity.¹⁹ The Africanity of the wax lies neither in the fabric, nor in its material usages, but in the signifiers which the fabric conveys and that are produced in the context of local consumption. Recursing to wax as an element of triangulation entails stripping the object of its content – thus of its Africanity – by preserving only the label of its Africanity. The example of the prayer mat is relevant here. It is only when stripped of its context and its social norms of use – thus its signifiers – that the authentic African object can be integrated into a cultural chain of added value. This dynamic process accounts for the fact that what was not appreciated by Africans (glossy fabric, large designs) became highly appreciated by African-Americans. Here the dynamic requalification consisted in wax fabric itself as a visual signifier of a connection with the African homeland, one that further became a 'trademark' of African-American identity.

The history of the circulation of wax-print demonstrates that economic globalization is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the revolution of communication and

information technologies – and their effect as leverage points – operating the reduction of distances and the acceleration of flows. Indeed, the model of interconnectivity which is proposed by a globalization narrative represents only one phase in a global economic system in which objects have been circulating by means of imitation for many centuries, and of which wax-print is only one example.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version in French entitled ‘L'étoffe de l'africanité’, published in 2002 in *Les Temps Modernes* 620/621: 128–45, precedes this article. I wish to thank Fiona Ross for helping to translate this article and Jonathan Friedman and Paul Stoller for their valuable criticism and comments.

Notes

- 1 This claim draws upon Shonibare's work in which he depicts Victorian dresses made from wax fabric: for photographs of the works, see ‘The Swing’ on <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/2004/shonibare2.shtm> (accessed February 2007), ‘Gainsborough's Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without Their Heads’ on http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/giveandtake/gallery/shonibare_pics.html (accessed February 2007), and ‘The Three Graces’ on http://www.repubblica.it/repubblicarts/shonibare/immagini/shonibare_07.html (accessed February 2007). For further reading see Pearce and Enwezor (1999) and Picton (2001).
- 2 In Paris, the *Compagnie du Sénégal et de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (CSAO), situated in the trendy Marais district, was one of the first shops to specialize in this section. CSAO provides department stores, such as *Galeries Lafayette* or *Printemps Maison*, with African objects appealing to worldly consumer taste.
- 3 This program is part of the Association Française d'Action Artistique (AFAA), a French governmental agency, promoting the visual and performing arts of Africa.
- 4 That is, the *mise en marchandise* or packaging.
- 5 The terms ‘reframing’ and ‘requalified’ are employed for the French word ‘requalifier’, meaning to reorientate to new uses.
- 6 For example, a few years ago Hermès put out a special collection of luxury scarves devoted to African art and craft. In the same spirit, Christian Dior has created a line of ‘Massai’ jewelry, and Christian Lacroix has integrated African fabrics and patterns into one of his collections.
- 7 Bobo is a term used to represent a major trend-setting group in Paris targeted by a variety of boutiques. A Bobo is ‘branché’ – plugged in – anywhere from age 20 to 40, and lives preferably on the eastern side of Paris (*rive droite*). Worldly and traveled, the Bobo consumes differently than the ‘*rive gauche*’ (left bank) living ‘BCBG’. Bobos blend with popular culture, yet distinguish themselves by mixing different styles. Individuality and self-experience direct their consumption, which ranges from simple to exotic or luxury products.
- 8 Fancy-prints entered the West African market in the 1930s. Produced exclusively in Europe for African markets until the late 1950s, fancy-prints represented a cheaper alternative to the expensive wax-prints while drawing on a distinct iconographic repertoire. Fancy-print production was shifted to Africa during the late 1950s and significantly expanded in the post-independence era.

- 9 Hodder (1980) points out that Italian merchants came to Tombouctou in this period to explore the possibilities of exchanging Lombardian textiles for Sudanese gold.
- 10 *Indiennes* originated from India, as indicated by their name. They consisted of painted or printed cotton fabric, mainly decorated with exotic animals, flowers, birds and foliages. In the 18th century, they were printed in England and France, particularly in Mulhouse, where approximately 100 patterns of these prints are available for consultation at the 'Musée de l'Impression'. These *Indiennes de traite* were intended for African kings and aristocracy.
- 11 Primitive batik techniques – consisting of a wax-dyeing technique – were introduced to Java from India during the 18th century.
- 12 They were called 'Blanda Item' – meaning 'Black Dutch' – by the Javanese population. When returning to the Gold Coast, they settled at a place in present Ghana that acquired the name Java Hill.
- 13 *Prévenaire & Co*, a Haarlem-based factory in the Netherlands, had recognized the importance of batik cloth to Java. By using a transformed 'Perrotine' – a French banknote printing machine – in applying a resin paste with rollers to the two faces of the fabric, the industrial imitation of batik was achieved. The transformed Perrotine became known as the '*Javanaisé*'.
- 14 At the beginning of the 20th century, Unilever had acquired the majority of the West African colonial trade companies, and held monopoly power over imports of Dutch and English wax-prints.
- 15 These early forms of imitation were produced in fancy-print quality. It is only since the late 1990s that Chinese-produced wax-print quality copies have appeared in the market.
- 16 In the 1970s, these women were said to have made of Togo a new 'Switzerland', and of Lomé the place of an international market of wax-prints in West Africa. The term 'Nana' derives from an archaic éwé form – Nana meaning mother – that would have undergone an emphatic reduplication to finally mean grandmother or elder woman, as J. Weigel (1987) defines it. The term 'Nana-Benz' results from the fact that these 'Nana' preferred – in the years 1965–80 – to use Mercedes Benz to pick up their merchandise from the big import-export houses when the Dutch containers arrived. Two documentaries have taken up the socio-economic importance of these business-women – 'Mama Benz: An African Market Woman', 1994, SFINX FILM/TV, 48 min., and 'Mama Benz and the Taste of Money', 2002, RNTV, 52 min.
- 17 Including, in succession, the producing units, the distribution centers, the retailers (wholesalers or semi-wholesale dealers), the detail retailers (fixed sales points or peddlers) and the final customer.
- 18 Political parties use wax cloth, or imitations, for their propaganda – for example, in diffusing their new programs, and commemorating anniversaries of independence.
- 19 As suggested by Simmel in his account of the 'Qualitative Aspects of the Group' (1950[1908]), where he examines structural determinants of social action, in particular group relations and their transformations on the basis of numbers. He suggests that when diads are transformed into triads, the seemingly insignificant fact of adding a third number changes the configuration of the group and allows for new possibilities.

References

- Amselle, J.-L. (2001) *Branchement. Anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Amselle, J.-L. (2002) 'L'Afrique: un parc à thèmes', *Les Temps Modernes* 620/621: 46–60.
- Baudrillard, J. (1981) *Simulacres et Simulation*. Paris: Editions Galilée.
- Busca, J. (2000) *Perspectives sur l'art contemporain africain*. Paris: Harmattan.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cordonnier, Rita (1987) *Femmes africaines et commerce. Les revendeuses de tissu de la ville de Lomé (Togo)*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Dadi, I. and S. Hassan (2002) *Unpacking Europe*. New York: Art Publishers.
- Elwert, G. (2000) "'Autour d'un livre. Le point de vue de Georg Elwert": Review of P. Geschiere and B. Meyer *Globalization and Identity*', *Politique Africaine* 78: 112–16.
- Friedman, J. (1994) 'Global System, Globalization and the Parameters of Modernity', in J. Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, pp. 195–233. London: SAGE.
- Friedman, J. (2000) 'Des racines et (dé) routes. Tropes pour trekkers', *L'Homme* 156(4): 187–206.
- Gordon, M. (2000) *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*. London: Routledge
- Graeber, D. (2002) *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*. New York: Palgrave.
- Hobsbawm, E. and T. Ranger (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hodder, B.W. (1980) 'Indigenous Cloth Trade and Marketing in Africa', in D. Idiens and K.G. Ponting (eds) *Textiles of Africa*. Bath: Pasold.
- Hynes, N. (2001) 'Yinka Shonibare: Re-Dressing History', *African Arts* XXXIV(3): 60–6.
- Katz, E. and T. Liebes. (1991) *The Export of Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kopytoff, I. (1986) 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in A. Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, pp. 64–95. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kroese, W.T. (1976) *The Origin of the Wax Block Print on the Coast of West Africa*. Hengelo: Smit van Uitegeverij.
- Mudimbe, V.Y. (1988) *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Nielsen, R. (1979) 'The History and Development of Wax-Printed Textiles intended for West Africa and Zaire', in J. Cordwell and R. Schwartz (eds) *The Fabrics of Culture*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Pearce, S. and O. Enwezor (1999) *Yinka Shonibare*. Birmingham: Ikon Gallery Ltd.
- Picton, J. (1995) *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex*. London: Lund Humphries Publishers.
- Picton, J. (2001) 'Colonial Pretense and African Resistance, or Subversion Subverted: Commemorative Textiles in sub-Saharan Africa', in O. Enwezor (ed.) *The Short Century: Independence Movements in Africa 1945–1994*, pp. 159–62. Munich and New York: Prestel.

- Rabine, L.W. (2002) *The Global Circulation of African Fashion*. Oxford: Berg.
- Robertson, C. (1984) *Sharing the Same Bowl. A Socio-Economic History of Women and Class in Accra*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Simmel, Georg (1950 [1908]) 'Qualitative Aspects of the Group' (a translation of Chapter II of 'Soziologie'), in K.H. Wolf (ed.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Steiner, C. (1985) 'Another Image of Africa: Toward an ethnohistory of European Cloth Marketed in West Africa 1873–1960', *Ethnohistory* 32(2): 91–110.
- Steiner, C. (1994) *African Art in Transit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stoller, P. (2002) *Money Has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Taussig, M. (1993) *Mimesis and Alterity*. New York: Routledge.
- Thomas, N. (1991) *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Warnier, J.-P. (1996) *Authentifier la marchandise: anthropologie critique de la quête d'authenticité*. Paris: Harmattan.
- Weigel, J. (1987) 'Nana et pêcheur du port de Lomé', *Politique Africaine* 27: 39–47.

NINA SYLVANUS holds a PhD in Anthropology from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. She is currently a post-doctoral fellow at UCLA's International Institute where she is working on a book project entitled 'The Fabric of Globality: West African Women in the World Commodity Trade'. She has published several articles in French journals, including *Les Temps Modernes*, and has a book chapter entitled 'Free-Trade Practices in Contemporary Togo: Women Entrepreneurs in the Global Textile Trade', forthcoming in U. Schuerkens, ed., *Globalization and Transformation of Local Socio-Economic Practices* (London: Routledge). Address: UCLA International Institute, 10254 Bunch Hall, Box 951487, Los Angeles, CA 90095–1487, USA. [email: nsylvanus@international.ucla.edu]
