

Fashioning African Cities: The Case of Johannesburg, Lagos and Douala

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Abstract

This article examines the reciprocal relationships between African cities and their fashion. Until recently, fashion capitals in the West like Paris, London and New York were perceived as being the only leading trend-setting places for global fashion design. The fact that besides these “key urban centers” (Breward 2011) a number of fashion cities have developed in Africa, which contain the networks and necessary infrastructure destined to produce, distribute and present fashion for local and international consumers, has been neglected so far. The article addresses this neglect by comparing three case studies on fashion designers from Johannesburg, Lagos and Douala and focusing on questions about urbanity and fashion as cultural practices. The article highlights the specific local contexts and urban dynamics of these cities, which provide a constant source of inspiration to the designers considered. Every city possesses its own historical, cultural, social and political context and networks which become represented in fashion. At the same time, the article strives to understand how fashion —from production to representation— positions itself in the urban landscape reinterpreting and transforming it. The three case studies are Stoned Cherrie from Johannesburg (South Africa), Buki Akib from Lagos (Nigeria) and Jules Wokam with Too'maii from Douala (Cameroun).

Fashion, urbanity and Africa are three terms which are seldom related to one another.¹ Africa is predominantly associated with traditions of ethnic entities in rural settings. Recently, this one-dimensional Eurocentric perception has been contested by a growing number of African fashion designers who are creating contemporary fashion in a cosmopolitan urban context. The fact that fashion is a global phenomenon has long been ignored in the West. Africa served merely as a source of aesthetic inspiration and as a backdrop for the Western imagination about the exotic other. As part of the ambivalent phenomenon of negrophilia in the 1920s and 1930s, the Parisian couturier Paul Poiret was one of the first to include of what he believed to be African into his innovative creations. Yves Saint Laurent interpreted Africa in his collection for spring/summer 1967 with nearly transparent mini dresses adorned with beads, raffia and shells. In 2005 the fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier provided a wedding dress of white tulle with a large white African style mask. Other examples include the current “Africa collections” of Western fashion designers like Ralph Lauren, Christian Dior, Donna Karan, Kenzo, Dolce and Gabbana or Vivien Westwood.

Over the past years, the one-sided perception of fashion belonging to the West has gradually changed. Moreover, Africa has even become “fashion’s new frontier” (Jennings 2011: 8). One reason is the ever growing number of African fashion designers and labels who are succeeding in the global fashion world. Hence, the label Xuly Bët of the Malian couturier Lamine Kouyaté attracted international attention in the 1990s with its recycled secondhand clothes referencing dada and punk. The designer Alphadi from Niger became famous not only for inventing the FIMA (International Festival of African Fashion), but also through his fashion design combining local textiles and techniques with classical Western cuts. Ozwald Boateng, born in London and son of Ghanaian immigrants, is currently revolutionizing British menswear with his bespoke, elegant and colorful suits.

Another reason is the recent fashion boom in urban Africa. Vibrant and diverse fashion scenes of local and global importance have developed in many African cities. Fashion made in Africa—ranging from haute couture to streetwear—has become equally sought after by young African city-dwellers as well as in the Diaspora and at international fashion shows.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the fashion labels that have provided the photographs. I am particularly grateful to Kerstin Pinther (Free University of Berlin, Department of Art History, The Arts of Africa), Christian Hanussek, Christina Meyer, Murray C. Miller, and Marko Scholze for their support.

The beginnings of this process of globalization and the increase of professionalism can be retraced even to (pre)colonial times but were especially fostered in the 1960s with the advent of independent African nations. Nevertheless, in comparison with the first generation of African designers, their successors today do not align themselves exclusively with Europe and North America but are also building relationships and networks within the African continent and on the south-south-axis with South America and Asia. Hints of this altered orientation include the growing number of international fashion weeks in various African cities where designers from all over Africa to the Caribbean participate and the opening of branches of fashion houses spread over the whole continent. The mediatization and digitalization of fashion, in form of fashion magazines, websites and blogs, are important instruments to reinforce the exchange within the local fashion scene as well as to build up new transnational and transcontinental networks. But the reorientation of African fashion designers towards Africa and the South go beyond the creation of new relationships and networks. It leads to a greater “creative autonomy that has not been seen before” (Udé 2011: 7).

The subject of this paper is the reciprocal relationships between African cities and their fashion. Until recently, fashion capitals in the West like Paris, London and New York were perceived as being the only leading trend-setting places for global fashion design. The fact that besides these “key urban centers” (Breward 2011) a number of fashion cities have developed in Africa which contain of networks and the necessary infrastructure destined to produce, distribute and present fashion for local and international consumers has been neglected so far. Consequently, the article compares three case studies on fashion designers from Johannesburg, Lagos and Douala by focusing on questions about urbanity and fashion as cultural practice. On the one hand, the specific local contexts and dynamics of these cities in which the designers work and whose visuality serves as a constant source of inspiration will be highlighted. Every city possesses its own historical, cultural, social and political context and networks which become represented in fashion. On the other hand, the article strives to understand how fashion—from the production to the representation—positions itself in the urban space thus reinterpreting and transforming this space.

The three case studies are Stoned Cherrie from Johannesburg (South Africa), Buki Akib from Lagos (Nigeria) and Jules Wokam with Too'maii from Douala (Cameroun). Before I present these labels and designers, I will start with a short summary about research on fashion design in Africa showing that recent trends and dynamics in Africa's fashion continue to be widely neglected in African studies and in research on global fashion phenomena.

Fashion in Africa as new research agenda

Over a long time, fashion—especially in fashion studies—was perceived as being a phenomenon exclusively to be found in the West marked by change, hybridity

and ephemerality.² It was only in the last fifteen years that fashion has become a focus in African studies. This is due in part to the expansion of the term fashion as used in the West to capture historical processes of transformation of indigenous clothing styles and textiles in Africa.

Another and more important reason is the growing number of empirical studies on contemporary fashion design in Africa.³ Some scientific journals have published special issues on the subject whose contributions analyze historical and recent fashion trends in different African countries (Revue Noire 1997, Fashion Theory edited by Rovine 2009, Journal Africa e Mediterraneo 2009). Amongst the recently published anthologies are "Fashioning Africa" (Allman 2004), "Contemporary African Fashion" (Gott and Loughran 2010) and the encompassing "Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion" (Eicher and Ross 2010). The aesthetically ambitious photographs in coffee-table books of art historians and fashion journalists not only show the high quality of African haute couture and prêt-à-porter-fashion but also deliver short descriptions of the career, successes and philosophies of the designers (Geoffrey-Schneider 2005, Jennings 2011, Mendy-Ongoundou 2002, Shaw 2011, van der Plas und Willemsen 1998).⁴

Despite the increase of publications and exhibitions, there are only a few empirical studies on contemporary fashion design in Africa.⁵ An exception is the American art historian Victoria Rovine (2004, 2009, 2010 a, b). In her actor's oriented approach, Rovine treats the question of identity of African fashion designers confronted with tradition and modernity. On the basis of the conceptual composition of the designed clothes, she differentiates between two ideal types of African designers depending on if indigenous materials, techniques and styles are combined and transformed consciously with new textiles, forms and accessories; or if the designers are making reference to their African heritage in a much more abstract way. In the latter case, this "conceptualizing tradition" (Rovine 2010b: 98) mirrors the historical, political and cultural background of the designer only indirectly in his creations. One

² In contrast, the term "dress" was applied to other regions of the world like Africa and referred to the tradition, timelessness and narrowness of clothing styles in these areas. Criticism on this Eurocentric perception has been brought forward by Joanne Eicher (1992), Sandra Niessen (2003) or Victoria Rovine (2010a), who see change as a constitutive element inherent in fashion not only in the West but in all parts of the world.

³ For an overview see Hansen (2004), Rovine (2009) and various articles in the Berg Encyclopedia (2010).

⁴ Exhibitions highlighted the meaning and change of clothing and fashion in and from Africa (Lenz et al. 2001, Luttmann 2005). One aspect of these exhibitions was also to challenge the differentiation between fashion, design, art and photography (Debo et al. 2005, Moore 2009). On the relation between textile and photography in Africa see Pinther (1998) and on the textile references in contemporary art in Africa see Pinther and Schankweiler (2011).

⁵ The French sociologist Pascale Berloquin-Chassany (2007) deals in her thesis about black fashion designers (West Africa, France, Caribbean and the US) with questions of identity in a transnational and transatlantic perspective. Contributions on Madagascar discuss the transformation of local materials like silk and the use of certain wrapping techniques related to burial ceremonies in contemporary fashion and art (Green 2010). On South Africa, see below.

example is the musician and designer Lamine Kouyaté who transformed secondhand clothes—bought at flea markets and in charity shops—for his label Xuly Bèt, by unsewing the seams and by reassembling the parts again with red thread. Often, he would leave visible the former labels or logos. The recycled secondhand clothes make more reference to the urban aesthetics of grunge music than inspiring associations with Africa. Nevertheless the designs of Xuly Bèt do refer conceptually to his African origin. The deconstruction and recycling of used and discarded materials represent an act of creative adaptation to economic necessities in urban Africa. This principal of recuperation is not limited to everyday life but applies to African art (or to fashion) as well, when young artists create art works out of found objects. In addition, the work of Xuly Bèt can be interpreted as a critical comment about the historical power relations between Africa and Europe (Rovine 2004). The case of Xuly Bèt shows that “fashion design need not look African in order to be African” (Rovine 2010 a: 12).

Another example is the Society for Ambiancers and Persons of Elegance, short *La Sape*, in Kinshasa und Brazzaville which has been analyzed as an urban phenomenon of popular youth culture (Gondola 2010, Martin 1995). A *sapeur* devotes his money and life to dress himself with expensive and elegant brand clothes from Paris and to display them ostentatiously in public. Whereas the wearing of European haute couture has been restricted in the past to the two Congolese cities as a critical political comment against (post)colonial regimes, one can find *La Sape* today in many other francophone centers in West Africa and in the Diaspora in Europe.

Another important fashion metropolis which is perceived of as trend setting for the whole of West Africa is Dakar.⁶ Taking Oumou Sy as an example, the anthropologist Hudita Nura Mustapha (1998, 2001, 2010) shows that the metropolis of Dakar serves as an important reference and a source of inspiration for the production and representation of the extravagant creations of this fashion designer from Senegal. The autodidactic multitalented artist created, with fashion lines like “Femmes” (women) or “Sahel Opera”, extravagant haute couture models and costumes for theatre and cinema which represent a fusion of past and future as well as of authenticity and cosmopolitanism. Oumou Sy combines elements of her Senegambian heritage like calabashes and Pan-African symbols with icons of an urban modernity like CDs and perfume flasks. The luxurious dresses are photographed in the public spaces of post-colonial Dakar staged in an environment of decay with broken sidewalks, car wrecks or cracked walls.

Like in Dakar, the importance of fashion made in Africa—be it local or global—from other African metropolises especially Johannesburg and Lagos is gaining weight. But also in cities like Douala (Cameroon) a vibrant fashion scene has developed over the past years.

⁶ See Grabski (2009), Heath (1992), Rabine (2002) and Scheld (2007).

How the cultural and aesthetical practices related to fashion design in these African cities differ and which transcultural parallels and transnational networks exist is exemplified by the three case studies of designers from Johannesburg, Lagos and Douala.

Refashioning the Center of Johannesburg

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, Johannesburg has developed a dynamic art and fashion scene. With over four million inhabitants Johannesburg is at the same time a cosmopolitan metropolis and a “contested” city.⁷ Founded in the course of the gold rush in the 1880s Johannesburg was from the beginning an immigration center with a local and global network in politics, economy and culture. The British colonial government and, after 1948, the Afrikaans National Party pursued a politic of apartheid and racial segregation. While the inner city was reserved for whites and Europeans, Africans, Asians and Coloureds had to live in separated districts (townships). The results were uprisings and protests of the anti-apartheid resistance in places like Sophiatown and others.

Sophiatown was a multiracial freehold township of Johannesburg famous for its urban black culture and music in the 1940s and 1950s which were featured in *Drum* magazine, a popular black news and lifestyle magazine. From 1955 onwards, the apartheid regime removed the black population to other districts, razed the old squatter camps and reconstructed the whole area under the new name Triomf (Afrikaans for triumph).⁸ Perceived from outside as poor and criminal, the image of the former townships has changed in South Africa. Township culture (*loxion kulcha*)⁹ is considered independent of place and black or white origin as hip and cool. This is also the case for Sophiatown which exist no more in its old form but is surrounded by the myth of the 1950s with memories of the golden age of black lifestyle, music, literature, cosmopolitanism, gangsterism and political resistance.

With the end of apartheid in 1994, racial segregation was formally abolished but the economic disparities between whites and blacks remained. Only in recent years, black South Africans—including more and more women—are increasingly successful in politics, business, media and culture. In Johannesburg policy initiatives encourage transformation into a cosmopolitan fashion city with adequate infrastructure for production, distribution and display. After the departure of whites in the 1970s and 1980s to Sandton district in the north, the inner city became an economically weak and criminal neighborhood of immigrants from all over the continent. For several years the city government has been establishing a new Fashion District in the inner city. The focus is the

⁷ On the history, culture and art of this “contested” city see Pinther, Förster and Hanussek (2010).

⁸ Meanwhile the district was renamed Sophiatown.

⁹ *Loxion* is the SMS abbreviation of “location” with the meaning township, *kulc(h)a* the ironic deformation of “culture” (Nuttall 2010: 279).

empowerment of the creativity of black designers and brands such as Stoned Cherrie.

Stoned Cherrie is one of the most prominent fashion labels of South Africa based in Johannesburg.¹⁰ The luxury lifestyle brand is founded and owned by a black South African woman. Holding a degree in Industrial Psychology and Sociology, Nkhensani Manganyi Nkosi (born in 1973) first started a career as a theatre actress, writer, entertainer and television producer. During a journey throughout Africa for the television show "Face of Africa" Nkosi was inspired by the urban energy of cities like Lagos but recognized the absence of a specific African aesthetic in the fashion world. As a consequence she founded her own brand in 2000.¹¹

Stoned Cherrie is the creative collaboration of several designers. Besides clothing the collection includes accessories like jewelry and eyeglasses but also homeware articles like locally woven upholstery fabrics. The couture range of the label is retailed in different places throughout Johannesburg. As Nkosi stresses in an interview, the city center of Johannesburg is a great inspiration for her designs.¹² In the past Stoned Cherrie had a flagship store in The Zone, a popular shopping centre with local labels in Rosebank where, after years of exclusion, the black middleclass has taken possession of the urban space. Currently the studio is in the new Fashion District and a new design house opened recently in Parkmore/Sandton, the rich white north of Johannesburg.¹³ Nkosi claims to mould black consciousness and pride in African history into a specific African aesthetic (Vincent 2007). In the beginning, the multitalented designer wanted to fight stereotypes about Africa by avoiding traditional clothing forms. Later Stoned Cherrie has been an eclectic composition of old beadworks and textiles¹⁴ typical for South Africa with new elements and forms to create a contemporary "Afro-urban" lifestyle brand (see figure 1). "Our aesthetic oscillates between past, present and future lending a nostalgic and fun edge to our design signature [that] has been inspired by our history".¹⁵

¹⁰ For the success story of Stoned Cherrie see Nuttall (2010), Rovine (2010b) und Vincent (2007).

¹¹ Nkosi received several awards for her lifetime achievement and for her enterprise. Her perhaps biggest international success was the participation of Stoned Cherrie in New York Fashion Week in 2009.

¹² Interview with Ladybrille, 6 February 2009, http://www.ladybrilleblogazine.com/2009/02/ladybrille-exclusive-stoned-cherie-at_06.html (accessed 10 December 2012).

¹³ Until 2009 the more basic pieces were sold nationwide in selected Woolworths. The cooperation with the retailer Foschini ended after a short time in 2011. The production is outsourced to local manufacturers in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Additionally there exists collaboration with local beaders and seamstresses.

¹⁴ The designer wants to "funkify" for example *sheshweshwe*, a traditional South African geometrically printed cloth.

¹⁵ See footnote 12.



1. Volvo Fashion Show in Sandton/Johannesburg with Nkhensani Nkosi 2011 © Stoned Cherrie



2. Dress in the "Sophiatown style" © Stoned Cherrie

The reference to history is established on different levels. The ambiguous local term Stoned Cherrie is a combination of *cherrie*, an old slang expression for a young, pretty girl in a township. Further connotations refer to the violence of the township and the fact to be high (*stoned*) but also to have fun (Nuttall 2010: 280). The brand is best known for its retro style inspired by the unique history of Sophiatown. Tight-fitting dresses with deep necklines and playful accessories are reminiscent of the fashion designs of the 1950s, as worn by Miriam Makeba and other black female stars in Sophiatown (see figure 2). For inspiration, Stoned Cherrie draws on the image archive of Drum magazine from that time. The popular black magazine was not only critical of racial discrimination but also represented black counterculture and cosmopolitanism. Vibrant black and white photos mostly taken in Sophiatown featured famous musicians, local box champions, shebeen queens or political heroes. Stoned Cherrie launched an haute couture T-shirt line emblazoned with the image of Steven Biko, one of the martyrs of resistance to apartheid. Far from a one-sided reading, as the political scientist Louise Vincent (2007) stresses convincingly, there are several layers of meaning and interpretations of this T-shirt campaign.

Cherrie's use of Steven Biko's image as a fashion accessory is provocative because it instigates a renegotiation of meaning both of the past (apartheid, anti-apartheid struggle and its heroes) and the present (femininity, African identity, the distinction between the public and the private, the body and the social). (Vincent 2007: 81)

The literary and cultural scientist Sarah Nuttall (2010) points out that the young wearers of the T-shirts are not very familiar with the role of Steven Biko in the anti-apartheid movement and its political contents. It is less about political activism than about the idea that Stoned Cherrie remixes and transforms the icons of former times into provocative and up to date fashion articles.

On the basis of fashion labels like Stoned Cherrie and Loxion Kulca, Sarah Nuttall describes how young blacks today feel entitled to be urban, to occupy the city center and to imagine themselves in a hybrid urban style. Nuttall suggests that this is a reaction to apartheid when blacks were only allowed to work in the city and had to leave the center after work to return to their townships. In addition to the regulation of the space colonial power and knowledge politics also focused on the body. The racist regime of apartheid denied blacks their individuality (Vincent 2007). Today in fashion these old boundaries and taxonomies are deconstructed and renegotiated. After the end of apartheid fashion as cultural practice and economic force means to take back public spaces like the inner city, to reinterpret history in its own terms and to reoccupy the visual representations of the self.

Styling the essence of Lagos

With fifteen million inhabitants Lagos is the most populous city in Nigeria and extends from a lagoon area of the Atlantic Ocean over several islands and peninsulas far into the mainland.¹⁶ Even before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century, the coast was settled by Yoruba-speaking groups. Lagos was transformed under British colonial power from a center of slave trade into a segregated city with white and African quarters. The prohibition of slavery and the economic boom in the 19th and 20th centuries led to a steady influx of former slaves from Brazil and Cuba, but also migrants from the interior and other parts of Africa moved to the city. Today Lagos is a cosmopolitan, multiethnic and multireligious metropolis.

In the first half of the 20th century, Lagos was one of the intellectual centers where anti-colonial, Pan-African and national ideas were widespread. Independence in 1960 brought a revitalization of traditional clothing styles with it. The oil boom of the 1970s led to the rapid growth of the megacity and enabled the development of infrastructure in the form of bridges and roads. Today the urban residents are reappropriating these decaying city spaces in an informal way. Despite or perhaps because of the informality and material shortages and the consequent need for self-organization, Lagos is a vibrant center of popular culture and art with a cosmopolitan reputation.

Lagos is, along with Johannesburg and Dakar, one of the most important fashion cities of Africa. Since independence there has developed a far-reaching fashion industry with nationally and internationally successful designers, growing businesses, numerous fashion weeks, famous fashion photographers, and influential fashion magazines. New fashion trends usually evolve in the megacity and spread across the whole country and beyond. Fashion made in Lagos is directed both to the local urban clientele and to the global fashion world. The relationship between the city of Lagos and its fashion is illustrated by the example of the young fashion designer Buki Akib.

Buki Agbabiaka was born in 1978 and raised in Lagos before visiting London's prestigious Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design (Jennings 2011). After working as an intern in a British knitwear house and visiting a Nigerian weaving factory, she created in 2010 her first collection combining traditional methods of knitting and tasseling with textiles like colorful wax prints and traditional Yoruba hand woven *aso oke*.¹⁷ For her menswear collections "Pre-Fela" (2010) and "Fela" (autumn/winter 2011) the young designer was inspired by the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti. In Lagos Buki Akib grew up near Fela's Kalakuta Republic and Shrine nightclub where the rebellious musician and human rights activist reigned until his death in 1997. In the late 1960s Fela Kuti

¹⁶ For a historical overview of the culture and art scene in Lagos see "Afropolis" (Pinther, Förster and Hanussek 2010). On the history of fashion in Nigeria see Plankensteiner and Adediran (2010).

¹⁷ In 2011 she received the "Young Designer of the Year Award" during Arise Magazine Fashion Week in Lagos.

founded a new musical style, Afrobeat, which was a complex fusion of Funk, Jazz and African influences like Highlife or traditional West African rhythms. Motivated by the Black Power movement in the United States he criticized in his texts political injustices from colonialism to the dictatorial military regime in Nigeria. As a supporter of Pan-Africanism he defended traditional African culture and values against—in his eyes—the degeneration of the upper class. Despite his popularity among the Nigerian public and his international reputation, Fela Kuti was attacked and arrested several times by soldiers of the ruling government. Since his death in 1997 his son Femi Kuti and other young bands keep his rebellious music and the tradition of Afrobeat alive. The current revitalization of Fela's influence on music and popular culture can be seen in the release of several of his old albums and the successful Broadway musical "Fela!".



3. Fela Jacket and Sax Trousers 2010/11 © Buki Akib

Buki Akib was fascinated by the distinctive style—the wildness and virility—and the rebellious music of this Nigerian hero. The designer is stylizing Fela Kuti as a type of Nigerian dandy (see figure 3).

He was a sex god and commanded attention with such ease and grace.
I was worried at first about using such an iconic figure as my muse but
fear always motivated me. Fela's music has taught me it's okay to be
ruthless and take risks. (Buki Akib in Jennings 2011: 102)

The names for the particular pieces of her collections are drawn from typical music instruments of Afrobeat (Sax Trouser, Drummer Trouser, Shekere¹⁸ Trouser) and from terms related with the musician's biography (Fela Jacket, Kuti Trouser, Shrine Jacket, Olu and Funmi¹⁹ Trouser). Implicitly the designer follows Fela in his critic of political injustice when she names an overall "Zombie Trousers" in reference to the album "Zombie" which Fela released after an attack of soldiers against his independent Kalakuta Republic. Colors, textures and cuts of Buki Akib's collection—for example the bold high waisted trousers, the giant coats or the knitted swimming trunks—capture Fela's unique fashion design. The photographs in the collection of autumn/winter 2011 are arranged in the style of the ecstatic and outlandish stage performances of Fela Kuti showing the singer and saxophonist with a naked torso and white painted face in front of the audience. The presentation of the collection at fashion shows is accompanied by the sounds of Fela Kuti's music.

Another source of inspiration for Buki Akib's creative activity is her Nigerian heritage and her childhood in Lagos. On her homepage the collection is described as "quintessentially Nigerian": "The label is a nostalgic journey the country Nigeria has experienced through the years through art, music and culture". With admiration, the young designer remembers the lavish parties of her parents attended by well-dressed guests in glamorous outfits. "Growing up in Lagos was an education in fashion in itself" (Buki Akib in Jennings 2011: 102). The mixture of bright shiny colors such as deep purple, gold, green and orange should make a reference to "the heat and sweat of the Lagos music scene" as mentioned on her homepage. At the same time different textures (viscose, silk, Lurex, cotton) and techniques (knitwear, weaving, tassels) are created with three-dimensional patterns which are combined with vintage patchwork of traditional *aso oke* and *ankara* prints.²⁰ The multilayers and the eclectic mix of materials and forms are reflecting the complex history of Nigeria and especially Lagos with the juxtaposition of its colonial relics, its modern city life and its informal market economy. The "pre-Fela" models are photographed on Lagos

¹⁸ *Shekere* is a gourd drum with cowrie shells common in Nigeria and the rest of West Africa.

¹⁹ Olu is the first part of male Yoruba names and means "god" or "deity". Fela Kuti's full name was Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome-Kuti. Funmi is used for Yoruba women as it is the case for Fela's mother Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a feminist activist in the anti-colonial movement.

²⁰ *Aso oke* is a special fabric of the Yoruba, which is worn until today for festivities even in the urban setting. Traditionally, the cloth was sewn together from hand-woven narrow strips, but now the strips are often wider and the material is viscose or lace. *Ankara* is the term used in Nigeria for industrially printed cotton cloth like wax prints.

streets and reflect the morbid decaying character of the old colonial architecture. “There is no other way to capture the essence of Lagos but through this collection” as it is mentioned on her homepage.

Like her idol Fela Kuti, Buki Akib defines herself as an artist who wants to tell—through her own media fashion—African stories: “Africans should tell stories of Africa—past, present and future” (Buki Akib in Jennings 2011: 105). Her collection historicized with African meanings is meant not only for a Nigerian or Pan-African audience, but has a transcultural, cosmopolitan focus. “I wanted to make a bold statement about a modern-day Fela that brave guys from Lagos, Tokyo or London would wear” (ibid.).

Fashioning the streets of Douala

With over three million inhabitants, Douala is not only the largest but also economically and culturally the most important city in Cameroon.²¹ Founded by Douala groups in the 18th century, the settlement situated on a river delta was an important crossroad for the transatlantic trade in slaves and goods. The local population under the aegis of Rudolf Douala Manga Bell made open resistance to relocation plans of the German colonial government. From the First World War Douala became part of the French colonial empire. In the 1940s, an anti-colonial movement was formed in Douala that successfully fought for independence (1960) and the merging of both the French and the British colony. In the 1990s Douala’s opposition played a crucial role in the political fight against the one-party system and the political-economic crisis.

The multicultural and multiethnic metropolis is characterized by the absence of formal structures which is counterbalanced by the importance of the informal economy, self-organizing neighborhoods and the spontaneous use of public space. All of these phenomena are constitutive for the formation of its urban identity and praxis. Because there was a lack of support for artists, Doual’art was founded in 1991 as an independent research and art center. This non-government organization focuses on urban art projects in which the artists negotiate with local communities and locate their art works in the public space. Other groups like Cercle Kapsiki also realize cultural projects and site-specific art interventions in the city following a participatory approach.

In addition to arts, a lively fashion scene has emerged in the last ten years in Douala with a growing number of (inter)national fashion weeks and successful designers from haute couture to streetwear. More and more couturiers working abroad—like Ly Dumas or Anna Ngann Yonn (Kreyann)—return to Cameroon with the vision to establish the necessary structures in the fashion sector and to create educational opportunities for fashion professionals. The participatory

²¹ On the colonial history see Eckert (1999), on the art scene of Douala see Babina und Bell (2007).

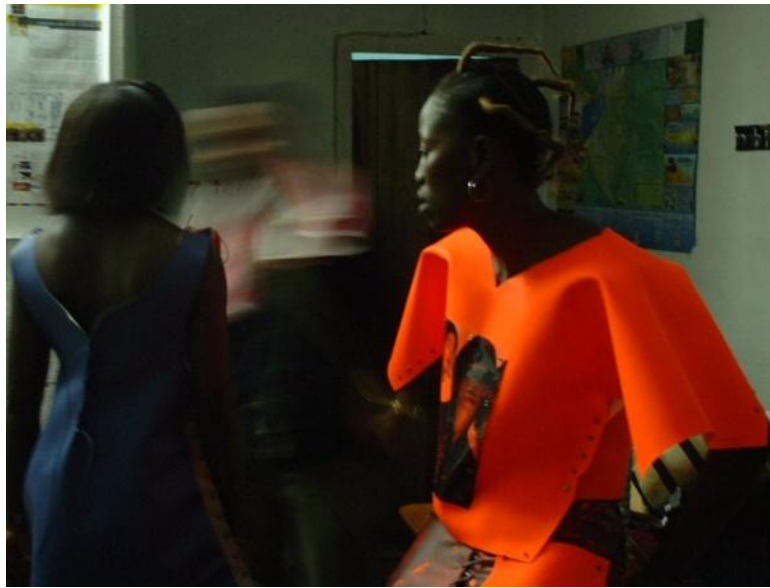
approach entangled in art and fashion can best be illustrated by Jules Wokam and his label Too'maii.

Born in Yaoundé in 1972, Jules Wokam works at the limits of art, design and fashion. In spite of a design study at the Ecole Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs à Strasbourg en France and various residencies abroad, Wokam lives and works mainly in Douala. His creations as an artist and designer include painting, sculpture, indoor and street furniture.²² As a member of the group Cercle Kapsiki, Jules Wokam participated in various art projects of the artist collective The Urban Scénos 2 in Douala (2002) and Kinshasa (2006). The aim of the project was the interaction and exchange between artists and the local population. During their residencies in Douala the participants lived and worked in the popular quarter New Bell, and finally presented their works there. New Bell was part of an urbanization and relocation program of the German colonial government. To reserve the center for Europeans, the Douala were to be resettled in a new district (named after the most important clan of the Bell). After the resistance of the Douala against these plans, migrants from all parts of Cameroon moved to New Bell. Today New Bell is one of the most popular, multiethnic and vibrant districts of Douala.



4. Fashion show of Jules Wokam in a popular quarter of Douala. 2002 © François Duconseille

²² In 2004, the all-round artist has been honored at the Biennale in Dakar for his work “Mobilium” (urban kiosk).



5. Local mannequins in plastic dresses of Jules Wokam.

For the art project Jules Wokam used colorful plastic in form of bags, tubes, tarps and nets to create his cloths. Young women from New Bell acted as mannequins in a fashion show which took place outdoor in front of hundreds of spectators on the streets of the popular quarter (see figure 4 and 5).²³

[Plastic] is a material that you find everywhere in the city—in the bars, at the markets—and it is a material which is part of the identity of a city in mutation like Douala (for this reason I wanted that the presentation is happening on the street. (e-mail message to author, 23 February 2012)

The materiality of the city in the form of plastic dominating the imagery of public space is paralleled by the materiality of fashion. The principle of recuperation—the deconstructing, recycling and composing of found objects—is applied in the everyday practice of city dwellers as well as in the art/fashion of Jules Wokam.

In addition to his work as an artist, Jules Wokam created his own label Too'maii in 2005. Too'maii is one of the few fashion brands in Cameroon and Central Africa producing young, medium-priced casual fashion made in Cameroon for a local clientele. Focusing on urban prêt-à-porter fashion, Wokam positioned himself consciously against haute couture. In the beginning the autodidact taught himself in a creative way the necessary techniques: "To begin with, I took clothes to pieces. I bought clothes by all the major labels and then took them

²³ Malaquais, Dominique 2008, "Douala en habit de festival", in *Africultures, Le site et la revue de référence des cultures africaines*, www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=7583 (accessed 7 February 2012).

apart to see how they are made, so I could understand their structure”.²⁴ There were great difficulties with the production and distribution of the label due to the non-existing structures of Cameroonian fashion industry. Currently the label is sold in a new flagship store in the business quarter Bonapriso and in three other cooperating shops in Douala. The customers are 70% Cameroonians and 30% foreigners and expats.²⁵ The aim is to establish the brand in the future not only in Douala but at the national level as well.

The references to African history and origin take place on several levels. In the slogan “Too’maii/be the origins” Jules Wokam uses not a local term, but refers to the archaeological excavation of a skull (with the nickname Toumai) in Chad which is probably the oldest hominid ever found on the continent. Africa as the origin of humanity means to him both the pride in his own culture and history as well as a necessary openness to the world.²⁶ “I chose to claim an identity for the brand at the same time local (Douala and Africa) and global (the rest of the world)” (e-mail message to author, 23 February 2012). Each year, in the dry and rainy season, two collections of young casual streetwear are produced. Besides the clothes, Wokam also creates accessories such as handbags and shoes for Too’maii.

The first ten of the twelve collections bear a motto including Africa-related topics (e.g. Bandiagara, Kwaito, Maasai, Vuvuzela) or associations to African identity in the Diaspora and the Black Atlantic (e.g. Josephine Baker, New Orleans, Rumba). The idea is to establish a local brand with a global image. For the first ten collections Wokam abandoned the use of traditional textiles (such as raffia, Dutch wax prints), local materials (such as cowries, calabash) and other traditional visual codes to avoid being classified as typical “African fashion” equated with folklore. In addition, many of these “traditional” elements such as Dutch wax prints are closely linked to the colonial history. But there was also another reason: “It was also a way to escape a pejorative identity of ‘African artists’ or ‘African fashions’ and to assert individuality and uniqueness” (ibid.). With this statement Wokam criticizes the wide spread discourse in Western art denying African artists an individual creative power. Instead it is assumed that African “artisans” are only able to copy the restricted style of their ethnic group. The first collection “Favelas Chic” (January-June 2005) evokes an African identity in Brazil. The designer connects the marginal urban spaces of the favelas with positive images, such as pleasure, samba and sensuality (see the description on the Facebook page of the label). The text also highlights Baby Doll which is on the one hand a description of the short women’s dresses of the collection in A-line (so-called baby dolls). On the other hand, it refers to the black and white film “Baby Doll” by Elia Kazan, who is also mentioned in the text. Released in 1956, the film was controversial for its eroticism and sexuality, but at the same

²⁴ Interview with Christian Hanusseck, April 2009, Douala.

²⁵ Telephone interview by the author, 21 February 2012.

²⁶ Interview with Dipita Tongo 2011, “Cameroun: Jules Wokam, le créateur de ‘Too Maii’”, in *Journal du Cameroun*, <http://journalducameroun.com/article.php?aid=8719> (accessed 8 February 2012).

time the film director criticized the racism and segregation between blacks and whites in the Southern United States. The “Favelas Chic” men’s shirts of Too’maii have a camouflage pattern embroidered with applications—reminiscent of the local embroidery crafts—and a sewn woman portrait in the Afro look (see figure 6). It is unlikely that the bearers of these shirts and dresses can say a lot about the history of the favelas or the film of Kazan. Rather, Wokam outlines that the movie is unknown in Cameroon due to the lack of cinemas (e-mail message to author, 23 February 2012). Collections like this are less an active political statement and more about the fact that fashion items are placed in a larger context of the Pan-African and Afro-American history, associated with self-determination, resistance and freedom and thus characterized as provocative, innovative and hip. As in his works of art and design, Wokam plays in his fashion design consciously and ironically with words and forms that are considered typical of Africa’s global history, according to the principle “we are the origins”.



6. Men’s shirt of the collection “Favelas Chic” of Too’maii 2005. © Jules Wokam



7. Plastic sac of the collection “Hypnotic Africa” of Too’maii 2012 © Jules Wokam

Recently, Wokam has also used traditional motifs and craft techniques (e.g. embroidery) in his fashion design. Under the motto “Hypnotic Africa”, the label offers a carrier bag in bright colors emblazoned by a drawing of a Bamum king of the Cameroon Grasslands (see figure 7). This art form was created—at the same time as the invention of the Bamum script—at the beginning of the 20th century in Bamum. Appreciating the graphics as an artist, Wokam chose the motif for his new bag line. In addition, he was impressed by the spirit of innovation and creative appropriation in the development of this art form (ibid.). He also plays ironically with the traditional references by printing the motif of an old king on a plastic bag.

The focus on urban streetwear for local clients is a consequent extension of the artistic work and ideas of Jules Wokam to fashion. Impressed by the flexibility and ambiguousness of the urban space, the artist and designer wants to explore the quotidian reality out on the streets. In a city with little formal regulation, Wokam studies the creative appropriation and contested use of public space.²⁷ Beyond a Western dominated interpretation of urban phenomena, Jules Wokam strives for a specific aesthetic and cultural practice of the city of Douala.

²⁷ Interviews with Christian Hanussek, December 2007 and April 2009, Douala.

My relation to Douala's urban space is that I actually live in this space. Often, people looking at cities in Africa sociologically or anthropologically only see poverty and kludge; they blank out the actions of the individuals—whereas that's just what seems so important to me. In fact, that's my real focus—is there an aesthetic act inscribed in an object? Can we look at it simply for its quality and forget the people are poor. For example, take the case of someone carrying a pharmacy on his head; this is an attitude—let's forget this guy is poor. (interview with Christian Hanussek, December 2007, Douala)

In his work Jules Wokam creates “urban utopias” inspired by the realities and practices of the people in the city of Douala. He is interested in the process of the emergence of a new urban identity in a multiethnic city like Douala, which is composed of migrants from different ethnic and rural origins.

[The city] is a space where all kinds of rural identities have to merge or dilute. This new identity is constructed from day to day and I am interested in the attitudes of the people, in the performance, in the way of understanding and learning to live together (in this sense my fashion meets my design). (e-mail message to author, 23 February 2012)

“The main challenge is to base his creations in the street”²⁸ is said about the fashion design of Jules Wokam. This description of his vision is characteristic not only for his fashion, but also for his art and design objects, and refers to the idea of participatory intervention and daily interaction in the urban space.

Conclusion

The rise of fashion design in Africa is closely linked to the rapid process of urbanization all over the continent. Whereas Johannesburg and Lagos have already belonged to the primary fashion cities in Africa and beyond for quite a long time, new local fashion scenes like those in Doula have developed only recently. The comparison between fashion designers from these three cities highlights the structural, cultural and aesthetical characteristics of the current processes and practices in Africa's fashion world. Both Nkosi (Stoned Cherrie) and Wokam (Too'maii) had other artistic professions (theatre and media as well as art and design), before engaging as autodidacts in fashion design. Only Buki Akib received a professional training in Great Britain. The extensive shortage of fashion institutions assuring formation and higher education in Africa—whether state owned or private—leads to a situation where many African designers

²⁸ „Le défi principal de Jules est de faire descendre ses créations dans la rue”, Blog of Kibonen Nfi 22 September 2011, in *Supermodel Search Cameroon*, http://www.supermodelsearchcameroon.com/blog/237_Miles_To_Fashion/post/TOOMA%C3%8F_OUVRE_SA_PREMIERE_BOUTIQUE/ (accessed 7 February 2012).

taught themselves their professional skills and/or through apprenticeships and stages abroad. The lack of materials and widespread informality of African cities correspond with the informal education and bricolage in fashion.

A similar picture is visible with regard to all processes connected to the production and distribution of fashion. In their specific contexts, Nkosi in Johannesburg as well as Wokam in Doula are pioneers who developed the infrastructure for their respective labels on their own. But apart from this common element, the structural conditions found in these cities differ to a great extent. In Johannesburg, the fashion industry receives policy support through specific programs and a fashion district in the city centre. The objective of this policy is the empowerment of creative designers who are young and black. Despite this political support, Nkosi has broken new ground as a local label during its twelve years of existence. She has experimented with different forms of production and distribution which eventually led Stoned Cherrie to become an (inter)nationally recognized enterprise.

In Doula, Jules Wokam had to do pioneering work to a much greater extent. For instance in Cameroon, there is no or little political support for the fashion industry and designers. Hence, with the establishment of the label Too'maii seven years ago, Wokam has had to learn every aspect—from the production to the distribution and marketing—from scratch all by himself. From the beginning, his streetwear label has had to face fierce competition from secondhand clothes of the West and cheap imports from China widely available in Cameroon. Wokam belongs to the rare group of businessmen in Cameroon who are successfully producing street fashion made in Cameroon for a local clientele. Recently, the number of local and (inter)national fashion shows in Doula and Yaoundé have remarkably increased and more and more young creative designers are becoming internationally recognized. Time will tell if this development leads to the creation of new independent forms of organization in the domain of fashion like those observable in the art scene of Doula.

Since the access and use of the internet for communication and networking is rapidly gaining importance in Africa and the Diaspora, marketing in the World Wide Web becomes crucial for the establishment and the success of a fashion label. All three of the entrepreneurs are well aware of this necessity. Hence, they are not only running their own websites on the internet but are also making use of social networks like Facebook to personally foster the recognition of their label. In the case of Nkosi and Akib, they actively engage in public relations through reports about their personal backgrounds, the latest collections, fashion shows, awards, and the like.

Apart from these structural parallels there are also overlaps in regard to aesthetics. Despite the fact that each case study deals with very diverse fashion trends, a common feature is the playful use of indigenous elements. All three designers turn explicitly away from clothing styles and textiles perceived as traditional and folkloristic. Instead, they want to create contemporary urban

fashion. They position themselves consciously against the stereotyped Western imaginary of European fashion designers about Africa and contrast this perception with one of simultaneity and modernity. Nevertheless, in all of their collections one can find references to traditional materials (for example pearls used by Stone Cherrie), local textiles (*aso oke* used by Buki Akib), regional prevalent techniques (embroidery used by Too'maii) or historical styles of art (Bamum drawings used by Too'maii). In the case of Stoned Cherrie as well as Too'maii, a conscious return to a traditional formal vocabulary can be observed. In the beginning of their career, both designers abstained from using these traditional elements. They started to integrate set pieces of a traditional aesthetic only when their labels already became recognized as representing a modern, urban, cosmopolitan fashion design.

The traditional elements of the three labels become integrated through a process of remixing in an almost incidental and natural manner, resulting in new coded and hybrid cosmopolitan compositions. With this selective and playful use of traditions, the current generation of designers differs from their predecessors who applied traditional clothing styles and techniques consciously as a statement against long established conventions. A case in point is the designer Ly Dumas from Cameroon who transformed prestigious textiles (*ndop*) of the courtly male elite of the grasslands to haute couture creations for women in order to transgress gender barriers in a subversive manner.

But the fashion labels described in this article do not belong to those designers either who do not make any kind of overt reference to their African origins, like the case of Xuly Bët whose recycled secondhand clothes establish a link to his culture of origin only on an abstract conceptual level. Rather, the examples of designers from Johannesburg, Lagos and Douala show that to describe and analyze contemporary fashion in Africa, long established dichotomies of traditional and modern, local and global, or Africa and the West become increasingly blurred and are not useful to understand the dynamics involved.

This conclusion also holds true regarding the playful use of history and identity in fashion design. In the case of Stoned Cherrie as well as Aki Bukib, the designers create retro fashion which refers to distinct fashion styles of the 1950s and 1970s. This could be explained as correspondence with the world wide *zeitgeist* and a strong wave of nostalgia, occurring around the turn of the millennium, in retro fashion (vintage) and other fields. Nevertheless, the recourse to elements of past fashion styles is locally embedded and motivated. That Nkosi makes reference to the former township Sophiatown and Akib to the legendary Nigerian musician Fela Kuti in their respective collections is motivated through the biographies of the designers and influenced by the specific historical, social, cultural and political contexts and dynamics of Johannesburg and Lagos. At the same time, their fashion design stands for a specific style defining the aesthetics of these two cities. It is interesting to observe that both designers opted for an infamous era which was considered on the one hand as a marriage of black culture, lifestyle and music and which was marked on the

other hand by resistance and rebellion against the political regime. This also holds true for the street fashion of Wokam which is embedded in a wider framework of Pan-African and Afro-American history and identity. Only very recently, the designer from Cameroon has started to use visual codes of the past which are associated with innovation and creativity.

Like the reference to traditional elements, the use of historic predecessors in all examples is more associative than a critical examination of political ideals in the past. Rather, it is a statement of self-determination, resistance, freedom and pride about one's own black culture, history and identity. This becomes exemplified in the visual domain through the deconstruction and remixing of historical and traditional codes which are transformed into a contemporary cosmopolitan fashion style. The interaction which underlies this transformation is twofold; history and tradition make fashion hip and vice versa.

But the designers do not only create through their fashion design an interpretation of the aesthetic representation of the urban self. Their agency is closely linked to the urban space and transforms this space continuously. The designers of the label Stoned Cherrie have positioned themselves through their fashion and shops consciously in Johannesburg and are expanding from The Zone in Rosebank via the Fashion District in the city centre into the formerly white quarter of Sandton. This process of repossession of public spaces through young black South Africans is a reaction to the politics of apartheid and segregation. Jules Wokam also locates his creative work in the urban context of Douala and his creations then influence this space. He has extended the artistic idea of participatory intervention in popular city quarters like New Bell to his own fashion designs. This encompasses art projects like a public fashion show in New Bell with dresses made of discarded plastic materials worn by young women of the neighborhood. Plastic is an everyday material of the urban space which is integrated in fashion design through a process of recuperation which then contributes again to the visual culture of the city in an altered form. For Jules Wokam, his fashion label Too'maii is a commitment to street fashion made in Cameroon, destined primarily for local clientele, instead of opting for an elitist haute couture for the global stage.

The case studies of the creative fashion scenes in Johannesburg, Lagos and Douala demonstrate that the widespread prejudice of fashion as a purely Western phenomenon which does not exist in Africa is not valid. Likewise, fashion cities like Paris, London or New York cannot be considered anymore as the only reference for fashion trends in postmodern, postcolonial and globalized times. New centers for fashion design have emerged. Contemporary fashion in Africa is closely linked to urbanity and urban history and identity. All three of the fashion cities have a specific historical, cultural, social and political context which shapes the interaction between the metropolis and fashion in different ways.

Africa's urban fashion scenes are as creative, cosmopolitan and diverse as the places and actors involved. To account for this diversity and to trace transcultural parallels and transnational networks, more empirical research on Africa's fashion in the urban space is strongly needed.

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