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ANOTHER IMAGE OF AFRICA: TOWARD AN ETHNOHISTORY OF EUROPEAN CLOTH MARKETED IN WEST AFRICA, 1873-1960

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Abstract

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Europeans in both France and Britain have produced large quantities of cloth intended specifically for sale in West Africa. These textiles were neither products of crude workmanship, nor subject to haphazard marketing techniques, but rather represented enormous effort on the part of European cloth producers and designers to meet the varied tastes and desires of their colonized clientele. This essay explores the ethnohistory of textile commerce between Europeans and Africans during a portion of the colonial era. When examined in their proper historical and cultural contexts, European textiles intended for sale in West Africa reveal a hitherto unnoticed appreciation which a group of European entrepreneurs had for African culture, fashion, and aesthetics.

In the last twenty years anthropologists and historians have demonstrated remarkable interest in examining contact between different cultures. Writings on the subject have tended to assume the form of "image" studies and have sought to explain the ideas and actions guiding culture contact in terms of Western attitudes toward race, ethnicity, nationality, and class. In such works, the sources used to reconstruct the past have tended to consist primarily of travel accounts, works of literature, government reports, and some newspapers and magazines. Except for scattered studies of Africanisms in modern art—which generally extol the sensitivity of the Western artist without mentioning his African counterpart—there has been no significant analysis of the image of Africa as presented in Western aesthetic expression.

This present study of European textiles intended for sale in West Africa is unique, therefore, in the sense that its principal unit of analysis is the woven and decorated, marketed cloth—as a reflection or expression of European visions of Africa generated under the pressures of capitalism and the influence of vested commercial interests. This study deals with two very different groups of people: the European textile producers of Manchester and Rouen, and the men and women of West Africa who bought and used European-manufactured cloth. Though these two groups were separated by a large body of water and an ocean of cultural differences, I will attempt to demonstrate that their aesthetic values and stylistic sensibilities were somehow brought closer together in the realm of commercial relations. The textile trade between Europe and Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries was a back and forth process in which European textile producers responded to African desires, and in which African consumers reacted to European stylistic and commercial preferences. This essay will not only seek to illuminate the way Europeans imagined African aesthetics and style but also the manner in which Africans responded to European interpretations of African tastes and desires.
The image of Africa which emerges from the woven threads, fast dyes, and printed fabrics differs from the image put forth in the writings of 19th and 20th century explorers, missionaries, colonial administrators, and amateur anthropologists. Whereas the latter offered, with few exceptions, the popular mental images of the so-called “dark continent” and “merrie old Africa” (see Beoku-Bets 1976:87; Curtin 1964:9; Hopkins 1973:10), the former presented a far more subtle interpretation of the ontology and stylistic basis of African life. One might say that the producers and designers of Euro-African or imported textiles were not only covering the colonies with fabrics; they were also quietly uncovering European fabrications of the colonies, and thus revealing certain orientations of Africans insinuated in the narrative sources. Though the textiles are surely more difficult to “read” than the texts, the study of European cloth intended for sale in West Africa provides a fresh and provocative vantage point from which to observe the initial threads of Europe’s colonial economy in Africa.

**Historical Overview of African Textile Trade**

European textiles have been traded in West Africa since at least the 15th century. In 1469, for example, Benetto Dei, an agent of the Portinari firm in Florence, is reported to have reached Timbuktu, where he sought to exchange Lombardian cloth for the gold of the Sudan (Hodder 1980:204).

Throughout this period and the following four centuries textiles were a major trade item in the exchange of gold, kola nuts, and slaves. During the 17th century, companies such as the Royal African Company, the Dutch West India Company, and the Compagnie du Senegal served to formalize textile commerce between Europe and Africa (see Hopkins 1973:92). This century also marks the first trade struggle between Indian producers of brightly colored, lightweight cotton prints, and British manufacturers of coarse linen cloth in dull colors. During this trade struggle—in which African textile consumers preferred the lighter and more colorful Indian prints—Manchester textile producers took special interest in satisfying the aesthetic and practical demands of their West African clientele. It was a period in which Manchester printers were able to conquer the West African textile market by producing quality cloth of special colors and patterns suited to West African tastes and desires (cf. Nielsen 1974;1979).

By the 1870s, European manufacturers were “well aware of regional preferences...to which they paid careful attention” (Spencer 1982:8). As the Times of London reported:

Many people believe that the African is a person of very simple tastes who is ready to accept all sorts of second quality goods and dreesing lines, and crude designs and garish colours, which the more fashionable nations reject. This is far from the truth. It has been the life’s work of many merchant converters in Manchester to produce specially African prints for the people, men and women, ‘on the Coast’. (1958:12)

European manufacturers have continued to export textiles to West Africa up to the present. In the 1960s, however, there was an important shift from production in Europe to local African manufacture in factories such as those in Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal (Spencer 1982:8).

**European Cloth in Africa**

Printed textiles exported to Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries have been of two major types: wax prints (wax batiks) and non-wax prints (fancy or roller prints). In her typology of imported textiles in Africa, Ruth Nielsen proposes eight types of inspirational sources used in designing both wax and non-wax prints for the African market: (1) Indian cottons; (2) Javanese batiks; (3) European prints; (4) African indigenous cloth; (5) traditional African objects and symbols; (6) historical events, current events, political figures and ideas; (7) natural forms, and (8) geometrical designs (Nielsen 1979:482-484). Because this essay is concerned with European visions of African style and aesthetics, I will focus primarily on the fourth type of inspirational source—conventional African textile motifs.

To be sure, on one level of analysis, the textile trade between Europe and Africa was not terribly different from the marketing of textile goods in other parts of the world (cf. Cox 1938; Nystrom 1928). Just as in Europe, for example, style, taste, and fashion were all determinants of production decisions and marketing procedures. Similarly, quality and pricing were both factors in the successful sale of textile goods. Yet, on another level of analysis, and unlike the more familiar Eurocentric context, producers of Euro-African textiles were separated from their consumers by, what I suggested earlier as, a spatial and cultural distance. This distance—and the subsequent stylistic methods, commercial tactics, and individual approaches used to overcome it—is the subject of what follows.

**A Question of Quality**

One of the most basic and, to be sure, most obvious functions of cloth or clothing is to protect an individual from the environment and its elements (Schwab 1979:25). According to Charles Montefi, both men and women of various West African societies relied on cotton cloth to protect themselves from the cold following the rainy season (1927:38). In this sense, then, the quality and durability of a cloth is of fundamental concern to the textile consumer. This is not only the case in Africa, but holds true throughout Europe as well.

With the growth of the British cotton industry in the formative years of the Industrial Revolution in England, the quality of manufactured cotton goods became more controllable, and its measurements more precise. As Hargreaves’, Arkwright’s, and ultimately Crompton’s methods of spinning cotton wool quickly superseded the old hand spinning wheels, the mass production of fine, durable cloth became more and more feasible (Chapman 1972:21-24). Furthermore, and what is of most interest to us here, as technological innovations flourished in the British cotton industry there was a parallel development and refinement in British consumer demands. From the 1780s onward, Michael Edwards states, “the middle class element in the market imposed a search for quality, to which the manufacturers responded with praiseworthy vigour” (1964:47).

More than a century after the development of quality control and quality awareness in the British textile industry, the search for quality goods was echoed in the textile trade between Europe and Africa. In a note titled
“Cotton Interests, Foreign and Native, in Yoruba, and Generally in West Africa” Governor Alfred Moloney of Nigeria pointed out, upon returning from a visit to the Senegambia in 1885, that quality, substantiality, and durability were all “conditions that should weigh heavily with home manufacturers if they aim at replacing this native weaving industry” (cited in Johnson 1974:181-82). The Governor went on to suggest the consequences of exporting “shoddy goods” from England when he wrote, “. . country [African] cloths are now exposed for sale in every market place beside the European goods, and are not unlikely in time to beat them out of the markets on the coast” (ibid:182).

The search for quality goods was certainly one of the basic underpinnings of economic competition in the realm of the Euro-African textile trade. As European textile producers learned to meet the needs of the African market, their cloths fell into remarkable favor. The concern over quality is partially rooted in a concern about laundering. As Cordwell notes “[t]he mud of the rains and the dust of the dry season, plus the perspiration due to excessively high temperatures and humidity make washability an essential factor in the selection of a textile” (1979:495). In general, the laundering properties of European fabrics tended to be better than those of indigenous cloth (e.g. the dye was usually faster).

Quality, however, was not only central to the competition between African and European weavers, as illustrated above, but it was also pivotal in the trade rivalry among European textile producers themselves, namely between France and Britain. Both countries prided themselves on the fine quality of their textiles. France regarded its cloths as durable and strong; Britain thought of theirs as supple and manageable. Yet, in considering each other’s cloths the definition or perception of quality became somewhat distorted through the lens of economic competition. France thought British cloths were too thin and too cheap; British observers perceived French textiles as being too coarse and too heavy (see Mathon 1909: xxiii). The ultimate judgment in the matter, however, was to be found in neither Manchester nor Rouen; rather it lay entirely in the hands of the African consumer. A summary of the consumers’ position is perhaps best expressed by Fourneau and Kravetz (1954:16).

We notice once again that the excellence of weaving constitutes a determining factor in the choice of the Africans in purchasing cloth, to such an extent that the signatory concludes with these words: “the poorest cloth with the lightest weight, striped or shaded, does not sell well at all.”

In this same article, Fourneau and Kravetz present an interesting outline of the methods used for testing the quality and durability of imported cotton cloth. “Through a process nearly three centuries old,” they write, “the native woman assures herself of [buying] good quality cloth by bringing the fabric to her lips, and sucking on it. In the past it was the fastness of the dye which she sought to test; today, ever since the technology in this domain dyeing has made vast improvements, it is the solidity of the fabric which she seeks to uncover. According to her, a salty taste is a sure sign of inferior quality, and in view of this there is a good chance that she will renounce her acquisition” (ibid:16).

With the use of such elaborate methods for testing fabrics, and through a clear understanding of what comprised quality in textile goods, the West African consumer was in a good position to challenge European textile production to new technological heights, or more often to force European textile producers to the summit of frustration.

The notion of quality in textile goods cannot be abstracted from the notion of pricing. In an anonymous note titled “Observations on the commerce of the Sudan on the Senegal River in 1897” one frustrated administrator, for instance, complains: “British textiles of mediocre quality are presently preferred to French cloths of good quality, because our textiles are priced much higher” (ANS, Q.49, 1897).

The Importance of Pricing

In the minute amount of literature which has been devoted to the description and analysis of Europe’s textile trade with West Africa, a predominant theme is the correlation between economic competition in the domain of textile goods, and the establishment of France’s harsh colonial tariff policy. C. W. Newbury, for example, has suggested that the Senegal “Guinea Cloth” tariff—which was first considered in 1873, later revised and reformulated in 1880, and finally established under the administration of Felix Faure’s stringent reform measures in 1892—was indeed the “thin edge of a very big protectionist wedge” (1971:228). The question that comes to mind is, why should France’s tariff policy have found its origins in the textile trade? And, why should the competition within the cloth industry have been the prelude to a long and elaborate scenario of anti-British tariff reforms which affected the prices of everything from cutlasses to spirits?

The answer to the problem is certainly not a simple one, nor is a single response sufficient to account for all the complexities within France’s tariff policy. Yet, in light of these constraints, I would argue that along with the more apparent economic catalysts to colonial protectionism—which have been discussed elsewhere by other authors (see, for example, Girault 1916; Clough 1939; Newbury 1968)—the textile trade served as the crucible for tariff reforms because within the cloth industry France became aware of its inability to understand the African consumer, as well as recognizing its inability to produce goods that pleased or satisfied their colonized clientele.

In the literature regarding France’s cotton goods export economy there is a general feeling that much of France’s lack of success in its own colonial markets was due to the failure to analyze and meet the needs or wants of the consumers in non-protected (i.e. non-tariff) zones (see Capronnier 1959:39). Emile Carré, in his study of the commercial relations between the French colonies and the métropole, suggests that British textile producers and merchants prospered in French colonies because France posed no threat to their establishments. He concludes that British textile companies “would not have settled [in French West Africa] had another [i.e. French] company already been flourishing” (1903:144-45; cf. LeComte 1900:376-77).

France’s tariff policy not only served to place British and French textiles on what one colonial administrator termed an “equal footing,” but it also managed to raise the price of imported textiles in all marketplaces of French
West Africa (save those in the Ivory Coast and Dahomey which remained zone libre). As early as 1900, France maximized the power of its tariff regime by imposing a "tariff maximum" in its occidental African colonies which established an ad valorem taxation on all fabrics (guinées aux autres) arriving from the étranger—anyplace other than France or another French colony (ANS, 2G:12-8, 1912). This sort of tariff policy led to such rapid increase in the price of all imported cotton goods that most Euro-African textiles were soon out of reach of the majority of West Africa’s consumers. Arthur Girault, commenting on ad valorem taxation, concludes:

The poor native, who is prevented from buying the coarse cotton goods of Manchester, does not therefore buy the products of the French industry; their price is too high for him. The consequence is that the commercial current has been checked, not merely diverted. . . . If the price of living had been less for the native, it is possible that after having at first bought English cottons, he would have attained to a new degree of prosperity, and would have ended by buying the more expensive products of the French manufacturers. (1916:285-86)

Increased textile prices also served to stimulate the growth of indigenous cotton production, and to revive the spinning and weaving of cotton at the local, village level. By 1895, many observers felt that African textiles had been successfully won over by imported cloth, and that African weavers were rapidly being "crushed" by the impact of the European textile trade, and that indigenous cotton production had been limited to the cultivation of a few irregular and sparse patches of Gossypium punctatum—the principal species of indigenous cotton (see Guernier 1949, 2: 75). In a letter to the Gouverneur General of French West Africa, dated 2 November 1895, the Director of the Interior, one L. Moutet, summarizes this perspective quite well. "The introduction of European-manufactured cloth, as similar to the most beautiful textiles of the country [Senegal] as possible," writes Moutet.

has led to a decline in native cloth production; a decline which has rapidly prompted the extension of our [Euro-African] trade. . . . At present, weavers produce exceedingly few fabrics made of indigenous cotton. Cotton fields are neither vast nor regular; they occupy insignificant corners of village perimeters. (ANS, Q:27, 1895)

As the prices of imported cloth rose rapidly with the establishment of ad valorem taxation in the early 1900s, Moutet's portrait of a colonial utopia for French commercial endeavors began to change. A mere two decades after the Director of the Interior reported the above situation, M. Lévéque wrote in his rapport politique du Sénégal:

Since the increased price of textiles, which render our fabrics almost inaccessible to the natives of the interior, the latter have taken to cultivating cotton once again; a task which they neglected while they were able to purchase inexpensive textiles in our shops. Around the villages today, we notice numerous fields of cotton, and the weaver's loom has reappeared in many marketplaces. Indigenous cloth, which [for a time] was considered too expensive, has come into favor once again, and business is now idle in the shops of our merchants who are well stocked with imported European goods. (ANS, Q:34, 1916)

Underlying the economic competition between African weavers and European textile manufacturers is a more subtle, less easily measured form of rivalry—competition between traditional African aesthetics and hybrid Euro-

African stylish ventures. How, it may for example be asked, does a new style of cloth or clothing compete with, or penetrate into a long-established fashion market? How did European Textiles become assimilated into existing social and stylistic structures of African society? Were they perceived as anomalies? Or rather, did they enter largely unnoticed? And finally, did Euro-African textiles replace traditional African goods, thus becoming, as it were, quasi-traditional items themselves. Or were they accepted into a separate, though related, stylistic market?

Fashion and Style

In the introductory remarks I suggested that producers of Euro-African cloth were quietly, even unintentionally, uncovering some of the misconformed Western preconceptions of African aesthetics, fashion, and style. Though the manufacturers' and designers' insights probably went unnoticed during the period in which textiles were being produced for the African market—and to be sure the colonial administrators in both French West Africa and the métropole were encouraging and praising producers for their commercial success rather than for their ideological advancement—it must be recalled that success in marketing textiles cannot be achieved without a clear understanding of the consumers' tastes, needs, and desires. And hence, the correlation, whether conscious or not, must have been present throughout this period. In short, I am convinced that there is a point in the Euro-African textile trade where good fortune or luck in the selection and design of a textile motif is replaced or, at least, coupled with sensitivity to African aesthetics—sensitivity being defined here not as the quality or state of being fully attuned to every subtlety of indigenous African stylistic cognition, but simply as the capacity to recognize the richness and complexity in styles of African adornment. The image of Africa formulated by textile manufacturers through, as it were, "primitive" marketing research, articulated through textile design and recorded in the various production phases of weaving, dyeing, and printing, have survived today, preserved in the warp and weft of their products.9

Because the sources are so scant, it is difficult to reconstruct the ways in which Euro-African textile designers discovered the subtleties of African tastes and desires. To be sure, the types of clothing worn by Africans was, as Beoku-Betts observes, a "well worked theme" in the writings of explorers, missionaries, and amateur ethnographers who traveled through West Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries (1976:93). Yet, these descriptions tended to be skewed through the lens of Western stereotypes and prejudices. During Béranger-Féraud's travels in the Senegambia in 1879, for example, he remarked on the clothing of the peuplades in the following manner:

We have already noted that the Negro likes gaudy colors; thus, whatever is extraordinary in this respect is most highly sought after. Scarlet red, canary yellow, sky blue, [and] parrot green make boubous [i.e. West African garment] capable of begrudging all those who cannot procure them. (1879:383)

Similarly, Henri LeComte writes of imported Euro-African textiles "whose loud colors and tacky designs satisfy their love of gaudiness, while flattering
their vanity" (1900, 185). Clearly, sensational descriptions such as these could do little to enlighten European textile producers. In order to understand African tastes and desires, they surely had to look elsewhere—beyond the whims of popularized literature (cf. Curtin 1964:215-16).

It has long been recognized that the African textile market was unique among other European overseas markets (e.g. that of the West Indies) as it required producers to deal with the textile consumer, because "the tastes of the latter were paramount" (Wadsworth and Mann 1931:150). As early as the 17th century, European merchants and metropolitan companies were effectively studying the "native finish" so as to increase their sales of textile goods (see, for example, Ladd 1920:14). In so doing, they were not only trying to determine African aesthetic values, but also attempting to monitor and predict the pulse of fashion change. "These [cloths] which were sometimes popular," write Wadsworth and Mann, "were at other times out of fashion, or suited only [to] one part of the coast" (1931:150). Indeed, fashions in cloth varied from place to place and from time to time, so that producers and merchants who were unsympathetic to African desires, or unwilling to adapt to African style, were all too likely to manufacture inappropriate textiles, and to arrive on the coast with a "cargo of unsalable goods" (Johnson 1976:16).

The nature of "direct contact" took two basic forms during the period under consideration. First, in the mid to late 19th century, textile producers were assessing African culture at a distance, often copying patterns directly from African textiles, and at times creating their own designs for sale in the African market. For the Euro-African textile trade, this was an era of trial and error marketing. Though little is known about how textile producers went to copy African designs (Polakoff 1980:13), several logical possibilities come to mind. One could imagine, for instance, that they sent "scouts" to West Africa to purchase samples of various African textiles; maybe they were relying upon ethnographic collections which were, at the time, developing as a result of European expeditions to Africa; or possibly, they were copying designs from quasi-ethnographic photographs, such as those taken by M. Bonneville, and presented in his extensive series entitled Vues et portraits d'Indigènes du Sénégal, 1866. Equally little is known about how producers went about creating designs. One cannot know what went on in their minds. Yet, suffice it to say that their creations were carefully drawn through an elaborate process of trial and error, in which patterns, textures, and colors were sampled and tested in the various regions of the West African textile marketplace. The success of a pattern obviously called for continued production, resulting in increased sales; failure of a design meant discontinuation. And indeed, "some of the favourite designs, in the favourite colour ways, may run for years repeated season after season" (West Africa 1950:850).

For the first half of the 20th century textile producers used a second method for bridging the spatial-cum-cultural distance between themselves and their clientele: a method which actually brought them to the African continent, and hence closer to the context of African tastes and desires. The spread of French administrative posts along the coast and in the interior facilitated European commercial agents traveling through various regions of West Africa. Many colonial officials even took it upon themselves to analyze the needs of the local markets in their administrative districts. As one individual proposed, upon returning from a tournée du cercle,

A good suggestion for [textile] colors would be half white, with the remainder dyed in either green, red or yellow; the latter being in greater proportion to the other two. (ANS, Q49, 1896)

Figures 1-4 are juxtapositions of African and Euro-African textiles in which the latter's motifs are drawn from the former's style. Although these examples represent an artificial sampling it seems fair to conclude that if African patterns such as these existed before the 1920s (i.e. the period in which the Anderson collection of Euro-African textiles was accessioned at the Musée de l'Homme, and presumably also produced), then European textile manufacturers at, or about, the turn-of-the-century were keen observers of African aesthetics and styles of adornment and decoration. And, to be sure, the subtleties which were captured by European textile designers are often remarkable.

The comparisons offered in figures 1 and 2 are important examples of European reliance upon African styles for two reasons. First, because the motifs are rather unusual, the chance that the patterns are similar merely by coincidence is unlikely. Second, because we have reliable, documented evidence suggesting that both African cloths were produced before the 1920s, it is not possible to argue that artistic borrowing was occurring in the reverse direction, viz. African textile designers copying European designs.

The paste resist from Senegal (Fig. 1) was collected by François de Zeltner in circa 1900, and donated to the Musée de l'Homme in France (Polakoff 1980:59-60). The Adinkra cloth from Ghana (Fig. 2) was collected by T. E. Bowdich in 1817, and donated to the British Museum (Picton and Mack 1979:165). The juxtaposition in figure 3 documents a technical rather than purely aesthetic imitation. Though the imported cloth was, of course, printed and not tied-and-dyed, the European textile designer copied faithfully the visual effect of African indigo dyeing techniques. Finally, the comparison of a Bakuba design on woven raffia to a geometric pattern on imported cloth (Fig. 4) raises crucial questions for the ethnohistory of Euro-African textiles. It is an important comparison for it has long been assumed that the Bakuba of Zaïre successfully resisted trade in imported cloth until well into the 20th century. "When Torday visited the Kasai in the opening decade of this century," write Picton and Mack, "he found that European cloth was only beginning to be accepted by the Bakuba, but that even then, it was often dyed with tukula (i.e. camwood) to make it approximate to traditional cloth" (1979:203).

Two very different, though equally compelling, possibilities are brought to mind by the apparent contradiction between Torday's observations and the implications of figure 4. On the one hand, it may be argued that Torday's visit to the Kasai did not reveal the full extent to which European cloth was being used by Bakuba men and women, and that in fact Euro-African cloth was more widespread in this region than we previously believed. On the other hand, however, it is conceivable that European interpretations of Bakuba designs were being marketed and sold in non-Bakuba inhabited areas. If this is the case, then the overall impact of the Euro-African textile trade on
African aesthetics is far more important than we may have imagined. Indeed, through further investigation, it may be possible to prove that trade in imported cloth served to redefine Africa's "traditional" map of aesthetic cognition—introducing certain forms of African designs into areas previously unfamiliar with them.

Textiles as Ethnohistorical Documents

In much of the literature in art history, textile history, sociology, and anthropology, cloth has been coined both the fabric of life and the fabric of culture. It has been said and written that you are what you wear, the clothes make the man (or woman), and that you wear your cultural values. Adornment has been characterized as an aesthetic experience; a definition of
social role; a statement of social worth; an indication of economic status; a political symbol; an indication of magico-religious condition; a facility in social rituals; a reinforcement of belief, custom and values; a form of recreation; and a sexual symbol (see Cordwell and Schwarz 1979: passim). In short, cloth and clothing constitute a microcosm where one finds mirrored the aesthetic, moral and nationalistic ideals of those who wear it (cf. Bogatyrev 1937).

Whether we conceive of cloth as symbol (i.e. link between the socialized individual and the wearing of clothes) or as metaphor (i.e. an expressive medium linking society, social practice, and culture into a single expressive unit), what is important to keep in mind is the notion that cloth, whatever else it may be, is a document which records, when considered in its proper social setting or cultural context, the historical, ethnographic, and aesthetic qualities of an individual, group of individuals, or nation as a whole. When
In disciplines such as African history and African anthropology, where written sources are few, it is crucial to maximize, from a methodological standpoint, one's potential sources for uncovering the past and understanding the present. Just as archaeology, oral tradition, comparative linguistics, and historical and spatial geography have all contributed to the reconstruction and revision of African ethnography, it is my contention that textile arts — and arts in general? — ought to be more thoroughly integrated into what has recently been labeled “a continuous interdisciplinary dialogue” (Obenga 1981:85).

Lethbridge’s photograph of three Togolese women (Fig. 5) illustrates three classes of textiles found in West Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries. The first cloth, from the left, is an African design painted or dyed on a lightweight commercial cloth. The second, is most probably a European-made cloth printed with an African-like motif. I distinguish the indigenous cloth on the left from the European cloth in the middle, simply on the basis of the latter’s regularity and precision — a feature less commonly found in hand-stamped patterns. Finally, the woman on the right is wearing a plain African-made cloth with a European motif (either Dutch, British, German or perhaps French).

What is interesting, as we examine the photograph more closely, is the fact that all three women are wearing identical head-ties, necklaces, cowrie chest-ornaments, bracelets and anklets, and dyed cotton belts. This could, of course, indicate several things. Perhaps, for example, the women were participating in some sort of social or ritual gathering which called for individuals to be adorned in similar fashion. Or, maybe they are members of a woman’s society or secret society whose participants share adornment style. But, more realistically, it would appear that the photographer, Alan Lethbridge, probably staged the picture. If this is true — and based on other photographs in the same book, I have reason to believe that it is — then the photograph reveals not only something about African fashion and style in the early 20th century, but also a bit about European interpretations of African aesthetics during the same period. It documents what the photographer saw as being “truly” African attire. But then, one might ask, why the presence of European-made cloth in a book entitled West Africa the Ethnne? I would argue that because imported textiles had become, by the 1920s, so tightly woven into the fabric of African life (cf. Nielsen 1974; 1979), that in the eyes of a European traveler trying to capture the essence of “Togoland beauties” (i.e. original photo-captions) Euro-African cloth presented itself not as an aesthetic anomaly, but rather as a beautiful stylistic blend into the dynamic and ever-changing fashion scene.

Conclusions

In many ways, both direct and contrived, this essay has taken up a challenge set forth by Marc Bloch in his book The Historian’s Craft. In a chapter on historical analysis, Bloch writes,

*Do you expect really to know the great merchants of Renaissance Europe, vendors of cloth or spices, monopolists in copper, mercury, or alum, bankers to kings and the Emperor, by knowing their merchandise alone?* (1953:156)
Though not dating from the Renaissance, nor bearing such honorific distinction, nor even boasting such a long and varied list of commercial endeavors, the producers of Euro-African cloth are similar to the merchants in Bloch’s description, for in most cases both have left us to study “their merchandise alone.” This essay has tried to suggest that in fact there is much to be learned through studying merchants and producers from their merchandise. Indeed, the textiles which were manufactured by European merchants for the African market stand as cultural documents, expressing not only what Hogatyev might have called the aesthetic and moral ideals of those who wore them, but also manifesting the attitudes, sensibilities, and emotions of those who produced them.

Textiles are unique items of trade. They are at once an artform and a form of economic commodity. Though other goods require some knowledge of consumer desires (e.g. varying grades of tobacco, or specific types of foods and spirits), textiles stand out as having an inordinate number of designing, producing, and marketing variables. In this regard, they are especially difficult to sell (Cox 1936:225-38). Merchants and producers of Euro-African cloth invested enormous time and effort in conceptualizing, manufacturing, and distributing their cotton products. The result of such efforts led not only to increased sales and capitalist success, but also resulted in more subtle interpretations of the ontology and stylistic basis of African life than those found in the narrative sources on Africa of the past two centuries. Though this is perhaps a common result of vested commercial interests—as William Falconer remarked in 1781, “[commerce] enlarges the ideas, teaches nations their true interests, and is a cure for the most pernicious prejudices” (cited in Curtin 1964:69)—the example of the Euro-African textile trade epitomizes the shattering of Europe’s distorting glass of preconceptions, thus bringing to a head the potential sensitivity and refinement in Europe’s image of Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. The year 1873 marks the beginning of a general campaign by Rouen manufacturers to demand for protection against foreign imports of cloth into Senegal (see Newbury, France 1968:337). The year 1960 marks the period in which France withdrew its administrative control over Senegal, and also signals the period in which the mass-produced textile industry burgeoned in the urban centers of West Africa (see Spencer 1982:8). Though citing these dates may make this project appear a bit more ambitious than it really is, it does help to establish a certain framework for discussion, and also reflects the approximate range of dates characteristic of my primary sources. Though this essay is neither restricted to Senegal nor French West Africa, it does place a considerable emphasis on both.

2. Some of the more noteworthy studies on the nature of contact specifically between Africans and Europeans include: Meuret (1961), Curtin (1964), Schneider (1976), and Cohen (1980).

3. For the purposes of clarity and simplification, I refer to the major French textile producing region as Rouen. Clearly, however, Rouen was not the only center producing cotton goods in France. Mulhouse, Villefranche, Nîmes, and Toulouse, for example, were also important centers for the spinning, weaving, dying, and printing of cotton cloth.

4. Throughout this essay I refer to European textiles intended specifically for sale in West Africa as either Euro-African or imported cloth.

5. A wax print consists of a "printed cotton fabric of plain weave to which the design is applied with hot wax or resin on both sides of the cloth." A non-wax print is printed on one side of the fabric in a "continuous process by engraved metal rollers" (Nielsen 1979:468).

6. Guinea cloths: are cotton fabrics, dyed dark blue in indigo. They were mainly produced in Pendédré (India), under the trademarks of "Congo", "Salem", "Oreapaleon," and "Filature X." See especially "Le Sénégal et les guinees de Pendédré," a note presented to the Commission Supérieure des Colonies by the Senegalese traders (AN, Q.45, 1897).

7. These zones included Senegal, Guinea and other territories in the Occidentale Française before 1902; Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, Guiana, Saint-Pierre-Miquelon, and Mayotte before 1896, and Madagascar and its dependencies, Indochina, and New Caledonia before 1897.

8. Much of the literature suggests that Euro-African cloth was unavailable in Europe, and reserved solely for the African trade. Geoffrey Gorer illustrates this point when he writes: But these [Euro-African] cloths and their designers are completely unknown to England; they are secretly designed and printed in Manchester and shipped abroad, without Englishmen ever getting a chance of admiring what is perhaps their pleasantest craft. It is a pity, for they would make a pleasant alternative to the flowered patterns and graceless rectangular, modernistic designs which are at present our only choice in upholstery cloths. (1935:176).

9. Several documented collections of Euro-African textiles exist in both Europe and the United States: the Fischer Collection at Michigan State University; the Nielsen Collection at Andrews University, Michigan; the Charles Levine Collection at the British Museum, London; a collection at the Ethnographies Museum, Antwerp; and a small collection at the Laboratoire d’Ethnologie at the Musée de l’Homme, Paris.

10. An example from contemporary Suriname is also illustrative. Richard Price remarks: If anyone should question the extent to which industrial producers would bother to go out of their way to learn about local tastes in cloth, the following example may help. Patterned cotton cloth, sold to a population of less than 50,000 Maroons ("Bush Negroes") who live in the interior of Suriname, is of sufficient economic importance so that the state-run textile mills of the People’s Republic of China began, several years ago, the practice of bringing one Surinamese merchant on an annual visit to the Chinese factory to discuss the next year’s pattern and color specifications. And I have witnessed merchants using a mechanical grid-like numbered frame to record— and to send on to mills in Europe and the Far East.
those new combinations of patterns and colors that they think ought to be tried next. In modern Suriname, at least—despite a miniscule consumer population relative to the relevant African markets—the middlemen between the foreign producers and the “native” consumers play an active role indeed in seeing that what they receive they can sell. And they try very hard to keep up with rapidly changing fashion. (1984)

11. Marion Johnson (1973, 353) discusses one instance in which an expedition to Africa (the Niger expedition of 1841) brought back with it a selection of local textile products, “carefully labelled as to their origin, use, and cost (in cowries).” It remains unclear, however, what these textiles were used for in Europe.

12. Some fascinating, preliminary theoretical work has been done using non-textile arts as sources for uncovering the African past. See, for example, Sieber (1967) and Vansina (1982).

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