Colonialism's Clothing: Africa, France, and the Deployment of Fashion

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> "… our natives, adopting the manners and habits of Europeans, are beginning more and more, especially in important urban centers, to dress in the European manner—in short, to follow our fashions"
> (from a pamphlet promoting the French Syndicate of Artificial Textile Manufacturers, Exposition Coloniale Internationale, Paris, 1931).[1]

> "It seems to us that [these African fabrics] can provide, each and every one, useful sources of inspiration. In every era, designers have turned to the Orient to revitalize their enthusiasm. Didn't Rabelais write (after Pliny): 'There is always something new out of Africa'?"
> –Henri Clouzot, *Tissus Nègres* (Paris: A. Calavas, 1931)

Clothing has long been an important medium for negotiating differences across cultural divides. Garments provide a means by which to absorb distant cultures into familiar frameworks, or to highlight cultural differences, often in order to reinforce cultural identity through contrast with the "other." Fashion, the realm of clothing that is characterized by self-conscious change, has long played an important role in the characterization of cultures and sub-cultures, providing a key means of marking affiliation or classifying people and cultures. An exploration of fashion across cultures offers an opportunity to trace the flows, intersections, and occasional collisions of forms and their associations as garments and images travel. An unexpected theme emerges from this exploration of the movements and transformations of garments and styles: the preservation, popularization, and transformation of "traditional" forms of adornment. The centrality of forms associated with tradition in these exchanges might appear to be an ironic circumstance, for fashion and tradition are generally considered to be at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum; one conservative and unchanging, and the other whimsical and transient.

What follows is a consideration of the intersection of fashion and tradition in early-twentieth-century France, where the construction of non-European cultures as "traditional" was one element of the colonial enterprise. This examination of fashion's

1 "La soie artificielle et nos colonies," *La Soie Artificielle à l'Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris* (Paris: Exposition organizée par le Syndicat Français des Fabricants de Textiles Artificiels, 1931): 25. (All translations from French by the author.)

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role in cultural negotiations between Western and African cultures is focused on the 1920s and 1930s, when France's colonies were at their most extensive and, in turn, when the country was expending its greatest effort to maintain support for the colonial enterprise at home. The quotations above, both of which address the representation of French West Africa at the same 1931 French celebration of the colonial enterprise, attest to two simultaneous impulses: the desire to civilize (Westernize) colonial subjects, and to draw on their "primitive" practices in order to enrich French culture. These paradoxical reactions, which continue to inform interactions between Western and non-Western cultures, are vividly embodied by clothing.

My focus is on France's possessions in Africa, a continent that even today is still closely associated with traditional cultures in Western popular imagination. Africa also has a rich history of fashion production: styles of dress have long been the subject of innovation as new media and forms are absorbed and adapted. Rather than fashion production in Africa, here my subject is French fashion *about* Africa.[2] Not intended as a exhaustive survey of the vast array of French Africanisms of the first decades of the twentieth century, this exploration of Africa's presence in French fashion markets aims to provide insights into the ways in which the realms of tradition and fashion inform and shape one another. It also indicates the provisional nature of such classifications, as garment forms and styles shift between "traditional" and "fashionable." This investigation also sheds light on the power of fashion and the promotional elements that surround it (including fashion journalism) to communicate, and sometimes construct, popular notions of "traditional" African cultures and identities. Using documentation drawn from a number of sources including formal analysis of garments, as well as the language that surrounds and elucidates clothing, such as garment names, advertisements, and fashion journalism—what Barthes has characterized as "written clothing"[3]—I will examine here the diverse strategies by which French fashion and textile designers combined, adapted and, in some instances, invented African forms in response to the demands and expectations of their changing markets.

This exploration of the intersection of fashion and tradition begins with a consideration of the permeability of categories and identities, drawing from both past and present contexts to describe the centrality of clothing to the negotiations that take place at the intersection of cultures. I then turn to the early-twentieth-century adaptation of African forms by Western designers, using both stylistic and textual analysis to explore the motivations for, and implications of, these exchanges of forms.

Classifying Clothing, Categorizing Cultures

The imagined distance between Africa, associated with authenticity and adherence to tradition, and fashion's reputation for frivolity

2 *Elsewhere, I have addressed the work of African fashion designers, both in Africa and the Diaspora.* See *Bogolan: Shaping Culture through Cloth in Contemporary Mali* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); "Fashionable Traditions: The Globazation of an African Textile" in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress,* Jean Allman, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); "Working the Edge: XULY. Bët's Recycled Clothing" in *Old Clothes, New Looks: Second-hand Fashion*, Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark, eds. (London: Berg, 2005); "Stylisme africain: réseaux globaux, styles locaux," *Africultures* 69 (2006).

3 Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 3.

and quixotic change is succinctly characterized by Jennifer Craik: "Symptomatically, the term 'fashion' is rarely used in reference to non-Western cultures. The two are defined in opposition to each other: Western dress is fashion because it changes regularly, is superficial and mundane, and projects individual identity; non-Western dress is costume because it is unchanging, encodes deep meanings, and projects group identity and membership."[4] Because it is, by its very nature, capricious, fashion appears to be an inappropriate vehicle for the transmission of tradition, which is associated with stasis and predictability. Yet I will assert that it is, paradoxically, their association with tradition that propels particular forms and styles into international fashion markets. Thus, my investigation demonstrates the mobility and malleability of "traditional" forms, which travel and are transformed at least in part due to their reputation for conservatism. In fact, one might assert that tradition is the most valuable commodity in the movement and readaptation of forms by which much fashion is created. A closer look at the exchange between "traditional" African styles and "fashionable" Africanisms created by international designers indicates the degree to which these two realms construct one another.

The distinction between "traditional" and "fashionable" dress has important implications beyond the realm of fashion. In a parallel to the much-discussed division between "art" and "artifact"—the latter term describing African and other non-Western visual expressions before their influence on the work of Western artists validated them as "art"[5]—fashion serves as a measure of cultural attainment. Fashion is the setter of trends; in comparison, other clothing is functional and conventional, following long-standing and unreflective practice. High fashion, which might be considered sartorial "fine art," is visible to many, affordable to few, and a sign of elevated status. As Neissen has succinctly asserted: "Who has, and who does not have fashion is politically determined, a function of power relations."[6] Thus, designation of garments as fashion has profound implications, particularly where cultures intersect.

One objective of my discussion of African influence on Western fashion design is to complicate classifications of African and Western styles of dress, which are popularly conceived of as separate realms that only occasionally interact. Such categorization, like so many classification systems, over-simplifies complex networks of exchange and influence. In her discussion of the popularity of Japanese fashion in the 1980s, Skov described the limitations of such binary models:

> … if we celebrate 'Japanese' designers as 'speaking back at' Paris fashion, do we not then reduce complex changes in both the fashion industry and global consumer patterns to a simplified 'East vs. West' model?... in doing so, we ignore the rest of the world.…[7]

4 Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 18.

5 The seminal exhibition and catalogue *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, William Rubin, ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984) documented the transformation of African sculpture from curiosity or artifact into art. Although the exhibition was criticized for its relegation of African and other non-Western art to supporting roles, the catalogue essays provide valuable documentation of the shifting connotations of African objects. Susan Vogel's exhibition and catalogue *Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections* (New York: Center for African Art, 1989) vividly explored how the exhibition and reception of African objects is transformed by these classifications.

6 Sandra Niessen, "Afterword: Re-Orienting Fashion Theory" in *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress*, Sandra Niessen, Ann Marie Leshkowich, and Carla Jones, eds. (New York: Berg, 2003), 245.

7 Lise Skov, "Fashion Trends, Japonisme and Postmodernism, or 'What Is So Japanese About *Comme des Garçons*?'" *Theory, Culture, and Society* 13:3 (August 1996): 136.

Similarly, the interactions between African styles and global fashion markets take place within an arena of multiple influences, motivations, and often misconceptions.

The histories of trade, colonization, and travel that link African and Western cultures have produced forms that shift between categories; the labels attached to them are more reflective of the nature of the markets in which they circulate than of any objective reality. In this environment, clear-cut oppositions melt into ambiguities: "African" or "Western" styles are points on a continuum rather than discreet categories. That the terms "African" and "Western" are more abstract than literal in their points of reference, reflecting conventions rather than realities, is dramatically illustrated in contemporary contexts by the internationalized realms of clothing manufacture, distribution, and marketing. The suits, T-shirts, and blue jeans associated with modern Western style may be designed, manufactured, and sold without ever entering a Western market. Wherever they are made, many such "Western" garments have been transformed into local styles. Eicher and Sumberg offer the terms "world fashion" and "cosmopolitan fashion" as alternatives to "Western", noting that "although a wide variety of tailored garments, as well as certain haircuts, cosmetics, and accessories, are often referred to as Western, many people in both Eastern and Western hemispheres wear such items of apparel. Designating items as Western for people who wear them in other areas of the world, such as Asia and Africa, is inaccurate."[8] Similarly, clothing styles that are broadly accepted as "African" may be produced elsewhere, as exemplified by the history of wax prints and other industrially produced textiles described below.

The travels of garments and styles provide insights into the shaping of cultural identities, although these exchanges rarely follow straight and predictable paths. In his discussion of modernity and the globalization of local cultures, Appadurai includes clothing among the commodities that might be expected to erase cultural distinctions but that, instead, may have the effect of reinforcing local cultures: "The globalization of cultures is not the same as its homogenization, but globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization (armaments, advertising techniques, language hegemonies, and clothing styles) that are absorbed into local political and cultural economies…."[9] Appadurai characterizes global commodity consumption as a "contest of sameness and difference"[10] in which nations and cultures negotiate the adaptation of new forms and the reinforcement of the local. When clothing is the commodity in contest, cultural and personal identity are directly implicated, making fashion a particularly vivid illustration of the tensions surrounding cultural change and exchange.

Whatever the direction of borrowing and adaptation, dress elements that have their origins in distant cultures may be transformed into local sartorial conventions, even becoming symbols of

8 Joanne B. Eicher and Barbara Sumberg, "World Fashion, Ethnic, and National Dress" in *Dress and Ethnicity: Change across Space and Time*, Joanne B. Eicher, ed. (Washington, DC: Berg, 1995), 296.

9 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 42.

10 Ibid., 43.

indigenous cultures. Women's dress of the Herero of Namibia and Botswana, which is based on eighteenth-century German clothing styles, offers a vivid African case in point[11] although numerous others might be cited as well. Eicher and Erekosima coined the term "cultural authentication" to describe the incorporation of imported objects or practices into new contexts, a process they illustrate through the absorption of European styles into local men's clothing among the Kalabari of southeastern Nigeria.[12] In these and many other instances, separating foreign, imported styles from indigenous ones is no easy task in dynamic markets with long histories of interaction: "traditional" dress is not necessarily local dress.

As the identities associated with garments shift unpredictably, their associations may double back on themselves so that the local becomes exotic and the once-exotic is absorbed into local practice. In her analysis of modern revivals of indigenous Japanese clothing styles in Japan, Suga notes such a reversal of roles: "Today, the West does not denote an exotic concept or product in the Japanese consumer market, but an interest in the revival of Japanese tradition has evolved as the Japanese search for Japanese-ness."[13] Western fashion has been so thoroughly absorbed in Japan (as it has elsewhere, including many parts of Africa) that it is now Japanese style that is the object of "cultural authentication" in Japan.

The quintessential example of such shifting labels may be found in the multiplicity of identities layered beneath the vivid patterns of popular factory-printed textiles generally referred to as wax prints. The origins of these boldly patterned cloths is variously located in Africa, Indonesia, Holland, and Great Britain; and depending upon the context, they might be identified with any of these locations. The cloths' history began with Indonesian batiks, made by hand using wax-resist techniques, which were traded into West Africa by European middlemen beginning in the seventeenth century. The Dutch colonized Indonesia, creating the Dutch East Indies, in the early seventeenth century. The Dutch East India Company, created in 1602, facilitated trade between Dutch colonies in Asia and European markets. Dutch textile manufacturers, recognizing the large market for batik textiles, sought to imitate the cloths' distinctive style using industrial printing processes.

Although the imitation batiks had little success in European markets, textile firms found ready consumers in another region of growing economic interest to Dutch and other European merchants: West Africa. Factories in Holland, and later in England, began making reproductions of the early Dutch approximations of Indonesian batiks. Manufacturers sent their representatives to Africa to conduct consumer research so that European factories could produce specific patterns and colors to suit regional tastes. Finally, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, African textile factories began to produce cloth based on the Indonesian/Dutch/British prototypes. Known as wax-print, Dutch-wax, Imiwax, and by many

11 See Deborah Dunham, "Predicaments of Dress: Polyvalency and the Ironies of a Cultural Identity," *American Ethnologist* 26:2 (1999): 389–411; and Hildi Hendrickson, "A Symbolic History of the 'Traditional' Herero Dress in Namibia and Botswana," *African Studies* 53:2 (1994): 25–54.

12 Joanne B. Eicher and Tonye V. Erekosima, "Why Do They Call It Kalabari? Cultural Authentication and the Demarcation of Ethnic Identity" in *Dress and Ethnicity: Change across Space and Time*, Joanne B. Eicher, ed. (Washington, DC: Berg Press, 1995).

13 Masami Suga, "Exotic West to Exotic Japan: Revival of Japanese Tradition in Modern Japan" in *Dress and Ethnicity: Change across Space and Time*, Joanne B. Eicher, ed. (Washington DC: Berg, Press, 1995) 98.

other names depending on place of manufacture and quality, these textiles are now ubiquitous in many parts of Africa. Through these layers of influences, inspirations, and reproductions, meanings were made and remade, so that wearing the cloth may evoke a variety of national, regional, and cultural identities. Its Indonesian origins and the European mercantile impetus that propelled wax-prints onto international markets are no longer explicitly recognized in African fashion circles, for they have become African textiles, however complicated their histories.[14]

While innumerable traders, designers, technicians, and consumers took part in the transformation of Indonesian batik into African factory cloth, the identities associated with clothing styles and iconographies may also shift quickly as individuals interpret garments that move between cultures. Lacking historical documentation of such individual transformations of meanings in African contexts, I offer a vivid contemporary instance that demonstrates the transformation of meanings as clothing forms move between markets. In a brief article on his experiences as an American student studying at the University of Botswana, Nicholas Weinstock described an instance of dramatic misunderstanding that centered on a single garment's divergent meanings. In his exchange with a classmate, a baseball cap is a shifting signifier, absorbing new meanings founded in local histories: "The white 'X' on his black cap, a student replied to my feigned ignorance, stands for 'Christ—yes, like Xmas, you know.' I'd stumbled upon a clumsy game of Telephone, played by murmuring fashion fads across the Atlantic Ocean. The difference was that the resulting distortions were funny only to me. When I giggled, the good Christian with the 'X' cap punched me in the chest."[15] Thus, a single article of clothing contains possibilities for dramatic reinvention: from one person to the next, a baseball cap shifts from a symbol of the Nation of Islam in the United States to an emblem of Christian faith in Africa.[16]

While we can document style change in past African dress, historical records provide little information concerning the role of specific individuals in the transformation of meanings as garments and styles were absorbed into local markets.[17] The few published descriptions of pre-colonial clothing creativity in Africa only hint at the role of individuals in the production of new styles. Jean Comaroff offers one fascinating instance of individual sartorial innovation in mid-nineteenth century southern Africa. She considers a British missionary's description of Tswana chief Sechele, who "… in 1860, had a singular suit tailored from 'tiger' (i.e., leopard) skin—all 'in European fashion.'"[18] Comaroff describes how the chief's changes in clothing style responded to political exigencies: "… in crafting the skin, itself a symbol of chiefly authority, the chief seems to have been making yet another effort to mediate the two exclusive systems of authority at war in his world, striving perhaps to fashion a power greater than the sum of its parts!"

14 For elaboration on the history of this cloth, see Ruth Neilsen, "The History and Development of Wax-Printed Textiles Intended for West Africa and Zaire" in *The Fabrics of Culture*, Justine Cordwell and Ronald Scwartz, eds. (The Hague: Mouton, 1979); Kathleen Bickford, "The A.B.C.s of Cloth and Politics in Côte d'Ivoire," *Africa Today* (2nd Quarter, 1994); John Picton "Technology, Tradition and Lurex: The Art of Textiles in Africa," in *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex*, John Picton, ed. (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1995); Anne M. Spencer, "Of Polomints and Alphabets: The Eicher Collection of African Wax-Printed Cloths" in *Cloth Is the Center of the World: Nigerian Textiles, Global Perspectives*, Susan J. Torntore, ed. (St. Paul: The Goldstein Museum of Design, 2001).

15 Nicholas Weinstock, "I Was a B.M.O.C. at Botswana U," *The Nation* 257:19 (December 6, 1993): 693.

16 The Malcolm X cap's transformation is particularly ironic: the Nation of Islam is an Afrocentric religion based in the United States, yet here its symbol returns to Africa only to be reinterpreted as a marker of Christianity, a religion that came to Botswana through European and American missionaries.

17 Two recent publications demonstrate the potential for detailed analysis of African dress in historical perspective: Bernard Gardi, *Le Boubou C'est Chic* (Basel: Museum der Kulturen Basel, 2000) and *South East African Beadwork, 1850–1910: From Adornment to Artefact to Art,* Michael Stevenson and Michael Graham-Stewart, eds. (Vlaeberg, South Africa: Fernwood Press, 2000).

18 Jean Comaroff, "The Empire's Old Clothes: Fashioning the Colonial Subject" in *Cross-cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities*, David Howes, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 31.

Such transformations of meaning and absorptions of new forms, past and present, illustrate how consumers draw non-local dress into existing cultural frameworks. The unpredictable twists and turns of baseball caps, factory-printed textiles, tailored suits, and other elements of dress illustrate Hendrickson's characterization of African dress as a medium for cultural exchange between Africa and the West: "… Africa and the West are mutually engaged in a semiotic web whose implications are not completely controlled by any of us."[19] An investigation of the intersections of France's colonial governance and its fashion production reveals that the web of meanings and the exchanges of forms on the Western side of this interaction were as complex, and as impossible to control, as they were in Africa.

The Early Twentieth Century: Clothing, Colonies, and Expositions

French colonial rule in Africa created a setting for cultural exchange under conditions of dramatic political and economic inequality, dependent upon the colonizing nation's construction of a clear distinction between the metropole and the colonies. The interactions between France and its African colonies were broadly characterized by the assertion of French superiority and the presumed aspirations of African cultures toward the European ideal. The cultural distance and power imbalance between "center" (Paris and other Western cities) and "periphery" (African colonies) was visibly enacted in styles of dress. Clothing styles were employed in Europe—and in Africa—as measures of cultural advancement in an evolutionary progression from "primitive" to "civilized" status.

In his analysis of patterns of consumption in the former British colony of Belize, Wilk conceptualizes the distance between colonizer and colonized using a temporal metaphor: "colonial time."[20] The metropole—whether Paris, London, Brussels, or another European capital—was presumed to be on the cutting edge in every element of cultural expression, while the inhabitants of the colonies were deemed to be perpetually out of date; their cultures frozen in the stasis of "tradition," remote from the contemporary. The notion of chronological as well as physical distance is particularly germane to an analysis of fashion, arguably the art form most closely associated with the passage of time. Seeling's definition of fashion in *Fashion: The Century of the Designer* is typical: "Fashion comes from Paris, and one of its greatest characteristics is that it changes. No sooner is something 'in fashion' than it is 'out of fashion' again."[21] Time is crucial to the economy of fashion; success in the fashion world is dependent upon not only being up-to-date, but also predicting the tastes of the next season. Africa's geographical and cultural distance from Europe was elided with chronological distance, placing the continent's cultures in a different place and time, as exemplified by dress practices across the continent, which were frequently deemed

19 Hildi Hendrickson, "Introduction" in *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-colonial Africa*, Hildi Hendrickson, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 1.

20 Richard Wilk, "Consumer Goods as Dialogue about Development," *Culture and History* 7 (1990): 84.

21 *Fashion: The Century of the Designer (1900–1999*), Charlotte Seeling, ed. (Cologne: Könemann, 1999), introduction.

to be out-of- date, out-of-touch, and therefore irrelevant to contemporary trends. As Wilk describes: "In colonial time, the colony is described using metaphors that blend the connotative meanings of time, distance, and cultural development. 'Primitive,' 'backward,' and 'underdeveloped' are such blending terms."[22]

The significance of fashion as a symbol of Africa's location in colonial time, temporally and spatially remote from the swiftly changing present moment embodied by French clothing trends, is encapsulated by a 1914 illustrated commentary on the French fashion scene entitled *Le Vrai et Le Faux Chic*. The folio, which was sold in a limited edition and was made more widely accessible through coverage in fashion magazines of the day, used Africa's ostensible lack of fashion as a foil for criticism of French fashion trends of the day. Written and illustrated by the prominent cartoonist Sem (pen name of Georges Goursat), *Le Vrai et Le Faux Chic* lampoons what Sem considered to be the frivolous and dangerously exotic fashions that were coming into vogue at the time. He presents a parable, introducing an unnamed Frenchman ("a Parisian man of good breeding, with delicate and sound taste"[23]) who went to Africa for ten years, where he was "completely isolated from the civilized world … completely ignorant of the evolution of modern life." Africa's ostensible remoteness is key to Sem's narrative: he needed a location his readers would have understood to be entirely beyond the reach of Paris fashion.

Returning to his home ten years later, the French traveler found that the elegant Parisian women he remembered have been transformed. Blindly following fashion has led them to absurdities that seem to emerge directly from "primitive" cultures that know nothing of Parisian elegance. Sem created prancing and posing caricatures to illustrate his vivid and highly racialized descriptions of these visions of fashion's folly: "… savage women adorned with gris-gris … Kanaks (an ethnic group from New Caledonia) wearing colorful mops, troglodytes covered with dangling animal skins …" and, most frightful of all "… a fuzzy-haired cannibal … wearing a bone through her nose." At this last nightmarish vision, the well-bred Frenchman "shuts his suitcases and takes the first camel bound for Timbuktu."[24] In her discussion of *Le Vrai et Le Faux Chic*, Troy notes the particular irony of the parable: "Paris fashions, Sem thus tells us, have become more savage, more dangerous, more threatening than anything one might encounter in deepest Africa, which, paradoxically, becomes a refuge for a sophisticated world traveler seeking to escape the irrational horrors of contemporary women's fashion in Paris."[25]

Troy's analysis of *Le Vrai et Le Faux Chic* is focused on the insights it provides into the shifting mood of the Paris fashion world, epitomized by the tension between two tendencies, each represented by a well known designer: Paul Poiret, whose exoticism was ascendant; and Jeanne Paquin, whose innovations were inspired by

22 Richard Wilk, "Consumer Goods as Dialogue about Development": 84.

23 Sem, *Le Vrai et le faux chic* (Paris: Succès, 1914), 4.

24 Ibid., 4.

25 Nancy J. Troy, *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 183.

the European past. Sem blames Poiret's use of African and other non-Western influences for the "moral and material perversion" of French fashion.[26] In the context of the present investigation, Sem's critique provides a vivid example of the construction of Africa as the embodiment of fashion's opposite. He treats the presence of African and other non-Western influences on clothing styles in the City of Light as patently absurd; an inversion so disturbing that it sends an urbane Parisian packing for the remoteness of Timbuktu! Sem was likely disappointed by what was yet to come in French fashion trends, for non-European influences continued to gain prominence in the years after World War I.

The influence of African and other non-Western cultures on French fashion and textile designers during the first three decades of the twentieth century was largely mediated by the carefully constructed colonial expositions. These government-sponsored events, which celebrated national identity and achievement in a wide range of areas, were held in numerous European and North American cities, and occasionally in other countries within the orbit of Western influence such as New Zealand and South Africa. During the height of their popularity, from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, expositions were leading public events that attracted immense crowds and front-page headlines. France's largest expositions required the construction of entire districts—buildings, landscaping, monuments, and the infrastructure of a small city—as well as the mobilization of public relations efforts to reap the benefits of such immense efforts. The numerous expositions held in Paris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century celebrated the city's dual roles as global fashion capital and as colonial capital.

France's African colonies were prominently featured at these expositions, often through reconstructions of African towns and villages, populated with people brought from the colonies to add drama and realism to these temporary African settings.[27] Many of the "Africanisms" in French fashion of the 1920s and 1930s were clearly linked to the colonial enterprise, and more directly to the representation of the colonies at expositions. Designers and fashion promoters gained access to imagery, objects, and people from the colonies at the expositions, and many sought to link their products with the immensely popular events.

The clothing worn by Africans at the colonial expositions was an object of European fascination, as indicated by the attention to African attire in one popular guidebook to the 1931 exposition: "We are soon plunged into Black Africa, in the Muslim city of Djenne, among the blue 'guinea' (cloth) of the Moors, the white burnous (cloaks) of the Senegalese, the raphia clothing of the natives of Dahomey and Côte d'Ivoire. Between the central tower and the lean-tos of the village fetishist—what a strange symphony of colors!"[28] In the same guidebook, descriptions of the pavilions of other colonial possessions focus on architecture and wild animals

26 Sem, *Le Vrai et le faux chic*, 3.

27 France was not alone in creating and populating reconstructions of non-Western cities and villages. Great Britain, Belgium, and the United States created similar "living dioramas" at their fairs.

28 *Guide Offert par les Grands Magasins Au Bon Marché*, Coloniale Internationale Exposition (Paris, 1931): 4.

(in Laos, Cambodia, Morocco, and the French Indies). The focus on clothing is specific to the sub-Saharan African section. Louis Valent, the official delegate from the colonial administration of Côte d'Ivoire to the 1931 exposition, also focused on the clothing of the African "residents" of the French West Africa Section in his description: "Two hundred indigenous people from the farthest provinces lent the whole of the Section a well-deserved note of exoticism which draws and holds the crowds." He notes in particular "the white boubous (robes) of the Senegalese, the blue coats of the Moors, the black robes of the Fulani."[29] The names alone—boubous, burnous, guinea cloth—match the "exotic" appeal of the exposition itself, although the entire scene was staged within the boundaries of Paris.

This clothing, with its "exotic" fascination for the European visitor, was clearly distinguished from the domestic clothing design prominently featured in a separate set of pavilions. As Steele notes, "All the international expositions … prominently displayed Parisian fashions and accessories, which attracted large and enthusiastic crowds."[30] Fashion production and colonial governance were celebrated in separate pavilions, and might appear to have few apparent points of connection. Fashion was the height of France's sophisticated metropolitan culture, while her colonial possessions were broadly characterized as but "primitive" societies that supplied raw materials for French industries and, after those materials had been transformed into French products, Africa became a potential market.[31]

Yet the realms of fashion and colonial possessions did converge at these events for, by the 1920s, French fashion and arts publications were touting the potential benefits of the expositions, which would encourage non-Western aesthetic influence on French artistic production. In 1923, French art critic Henri Clouzot's highest praise for African textiles (in particular the raffia cloth of the Kuba and related groups) was that it might serve to inspire French designers. After describing the "simple" beauty of the "bushongo velours" and the cotton fabrics of Upper Volta in West Africa which are "stamped, in black and red, with designs of such rare originality," he notes that "even the most primitive" civilizations have inspired French textiles. He encourages his readers to "… rejuvenate our decorative grammar … as if our climate rivaled the skies over Timbuktu or Haoï…."[32] Whether in Southeast Asia or West Africa, France's colonies were sources of styles and forms that would be absorbed and "authenticated" in the hands of French designers and artists. One article on the 1931 exposition noted: "A success as perfect as the Colonial Exposition … cannot help having ramifications in our life today." In fact, the author continues, "An infusion of exoticism is constantly necessary for our old West; our civilization regularly tries to rejuvenate itself by plunging into a bath of primitive life."[33] The colonial expositions brought this cultural bath conveniently into the streets and parks of French and other European cities.[34] Instead

29 *Le Livre d'Or de l'Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris 1931* (Paris: Librarie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1931): 85.

30 Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (New York: Berg, 1998), 149.

31 The importance of the colonies as markets for French textile production also was part of the 1931 exposition's celebration of French possessions abroad: "Already France Abroad [*France extérieure*] is the biggest client of France in Europe (*France d'Europe*) … a quarter of the total production of our cotton fabrics are absorbed by our colonies," *Le Livre d'Or de l'Expostion Coloniale* 1931: 9.

32 Henri Clouzot, "La Tissage à la Main dans les Textiles," *Renaissance de l'Art Français* (1923): 553–54.

33 "De l'Influence des Colonies," *Jardin des Modes* (July 15, 1931): 428.

34 Colonial expositions were held in other countries that had colonial possessions, including Belgium, England, and the Netherlands.

of going all the way to Africa for inspiration, French designers and other trendsetters simply made their way to nearby fairgrounds.

The importance of the African materials as resources for French artistic creativity also was acknowledged at the source: Africa. In one explicit example, a letter from Camille Guy, governor of the French Sudan, to his lieutenant governor in Bamako (capital of the colony), describes the importance of commissioning textiles for the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris: "We must place fabrics at the top of the list of manufactures. The textiles of French West Africa, in their variety and the surprising nature of their designs … have so amazed the specialists in this area that fashion this winter is clearly influenced by the examples displayed by our African colonies. We must therefore show as wide a variety of these fabrics as possible and ask the indigenous artisans to make them with the Exposition in mind, inspired only by their ideas and their personal taste."[35] The importance of untouched "authenticity" is clear, as is the governor's recognition that textiles provided a particularly potent source of "pure" African style.

An examination of Paris fashion at the time of the 1931 *Exposition Coloniale Internationale*, an exceptionally large event, indicates that, while French fashion and textile designers drew inspiration from the versions of Africa presented by this officially mediated event, their borrowing was located within a cultural narrative that reinforced French cultural superiority. Further, the influence of African and other non-Western cultures in the realm of French art and design was encouraged by colonial government officials, asserting that the artistic manifestations of the colonial system supported its economic and political interests.

Even as the 1931 exposition's displays of the arts and cultures of France's colonial possessions were lauded for their potential impact on French fashion and design, a group of dioramas in another portion of the exposition celebrated the disappearance in Africa of the very dress forms that fascinated and inspired artists and designers in the metropole. Hodier described these dioramas, which were located in the Musée des Colonies, a building constructed for the 1931 exposition:[36]

> The first window represented a barely clothed African student before the African teacher; the second display featured the same student, this time wearing a *pagne* (loincloth) at a French primary school; the third depicted the student wearing a *boubou* (robe) at a technical training school; and in the fourth and final display, the African pupil was transformed, dressed in pants and shirt, at a college-level technical school.[37]

In official representations of Africa, the betterment of the colonial subject was clearly marked by progress toward Western-style dress: the abandonment of "traditional" attire was presented as an

35 Camille Guy to Lieutenant-Gounerneur du Soudan, October 29, 1923, Archives Nationales, Bamako, Mali.

36 The building remained a museum of non-Western arts long after the end of official colonization. It changed names several times, from Musée des Colonies to Musée d'Outre-Mer to Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie. It closed in 2003, when its collections were moved to the Musée du Quai Branly.

37 Catherine Hodier, "Decentering the Gaze at French Colonial Expositions" in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Empires*, Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 239–240.

achievement for Africa. Thus, two apparently conflicting responses to France's African possessions were on display at this government-sponsored event. Depending on where visitors to the 1931 colonial exposition looked, they might see African textiles and clothing as creative expressions to be emulated, or as symbols of the deplorable backwardness of the colonies.

The image of Africans "civilized" by French influence was intended to garner public support for the nation's colonial project. So too was the promise of African and other non-Western influence on France's arts and design industries. In her discussion of the *coloniale modern*, an aesthetic movement of the 1920s and 1930s that combined European design of the day with influences from the decorative arts of the French colonies, Finamore notes that promotion of the style had economic and political as well as artistic motivations: "When it was becoming more and more crucial that France defend its colonialist stance, the *coloniale modern* sought to assist the rationalization of colonial activity by promoting the colonies as a source of aesthetic inspiration and raw materials for consumer products."[38] She further notes that the expositions deployed the nation's famed fashion industry as an element of this strategy, for the colonial expositions linked France's fashion industry and the nation's colonial possessions: "France had always been proud of its luxury industry and its undeniable position as a taste-setter and, like the colonies, fashion was an important and viable commercial asset. The fairs helped ensure that the French populace understood and supported this."[39] In his analysis of the cultural roles of expositions and world's fairs, Rydell describes the *coloniale modern* as the French government's effort "… to make the modernistic dream worlds of mass consumption on view at fairs unthinkable apart from the maintenance and extension of empire."[40] The garments that resulted from these officially sanctioned interactions provide insights into the processes of transformation by which distant styles are domesticated. In addition to the forms themselves, the marketing that surrounded garments reinforced, or even created, their associations with Africa, even as distance was maintained from these non-Western sources of inspiration, and the cultural hierarchy always reinforced.

Adaptations and References: Modes of Influence across Cultures

Africa's impact on early-twentieth-century French fashion was manifested in a variety of forms, some readily recognizable, and others bearing little visible resemblance to their sources of inspiration. African influence was most readily apparent in instances of stylistic or iconographic adaptations, in which recognizably African forms and imagery were incorporated into French garments. In some instances, designers drew directly from aspects of African dress; adapting textiles, patterns, garment types, and media such as beads or raffia into their work. Designers also made reference to Africa through the incorporation of figurative iconography associated

38 Michelle Tolini Finamore, "Fashioning the Colonial at the Paris Expositions, 1925 and 1931," *Fashion Theory* 7:3/4 (2003): 348.

39 Ibid.: 349.

40 Robert W. Rydell, *The World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 62.

with the continent. Prominent among the iconographic references to France's non-Western colonies, which included Oceanic and Southeast Asian possessions as well as those in West and Central Africa, were elephants, palm trees, animal prints, and representations of African sculpture.

Elsewhere, I have discussed how similar strategies may be discerned in contemporary tourist art markets, where references to local culture are crucial to the marketability of textiles and other products.[41] I have labeled the former approach, adapting elements of African dress to Western design, "reproductive" and the latter, in which African imagery is depicted through clothing, "mimetic."[42] An article in a 1931 French fashion magazine, extolling the value of the colonies as sources of inspiration for fashion and textile design, made a similar distinction between these strategies: one "decorative" and the other "geographical or human": "It is not only the decorative elements strictly speaking that interest us, but also the geographical and human elements, the landscape where the great palm trees balance, where the cacti proliferate with their grimacing silhouettes, the familiar objects, the people themselves in their touching and simple complexity."[43] Two worlds of imagery thus were available to fashion designers and promoters: the media and imagery of African dress practices, and Africa itself.

Along with these two approaches, designers and fashion promoters have long made links to Africa through media that supplement garments as they enter the market, shaping their reception. These include textual references, such as the names assigned to specific garments or styles and the descriptions by which garments were marketed, as well as the illustration of garments, most notably through fashion photography. These various strategies provide a framework for analyzing Africa's diverse manifestations in French fashion design.

The designer who is most closely associated with non-Western sources of inspiration is Paul Poiret, the internationally renowned early-twentieth-century French fashion designer and tastemaker (whose work was caricatured by Sem). Poiret incorporated textiles, garment styles, ornaments, and marketing strategies that contrasted sharply with the prevailing practices of the day. He collected textiles and garments from around the world, designing his "Oriental-style" garments and theatre costumes "according to authentic documents."[44] While much of his work of the 1910s and 1920s makes reference to Asian and Middle Eastern precedents, Africa appears as well. Poiret employed both mimetic and reproductive approaches, drawing from images of Africa and Africans as well as from African textiles and garment styles.

In 1920, Poiret created a woman's dress closely based on the *akhnif*, a style of man's cloak from Morocco's High Atlas region. (Figure 1) In addition to the direct transposition of an African style—exemplifying the mimetic approach to cross-cultural influence—the

41 Victoria L. Rovine, *Bogolan: Shaping Culture through Cloth in Contemporary Mali* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 34–36.

42 In her analysis of African influence on textile design in early-twentieth-century Europe and the United States, Hannel proposes a different set of strategies by which African influence was incorporated: imitation, adaptation, and transformation. The first category consists of direct copies of African forms; the second African forms that are not copied directly but rather serve as sources of inspiration; and the third encompasses textile motifs that are based on stereotyped, often racist imagery. Susan Hannel, "'Africana' Textiles: Imitation, Adaptation, and Transformation during the Jazz Age," *Textile* 4:1 (2006): 68–103.

43 "De l'Influence des Colonies," *Jardin des Modes* (July 15, 1931): 428.

44 Troy (2003) citing Paul Poiret, *My First Fifty Years* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1931), 185.

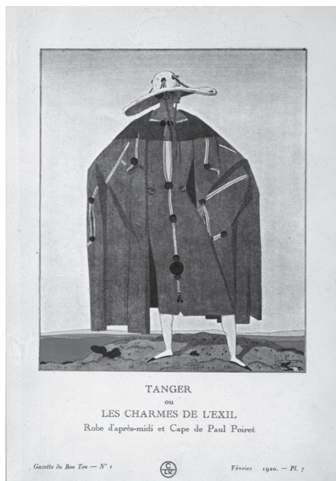

Figure 1
"Tanger ou les Charmes de l'éxil," woman's dress and cape designed by Paul Poiret, illustrated by Georges Lepape, from *La Gazette du Bon Ton*, no. 1, 1920. Courtesy of Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Paris. Photo Laurent Sully Jaulmes, collection UFAC.

garment's name, "Tanger," creates a textual link to the continent, underscoring its stylistic debt to Africa. Tangiers, a city at Morocco's northern tip just across the Straits of Gibraltar from Spain, was a particularly evocative name. Tangiers was the gateway to the romantic realm of North Africa for European visitors. By shifting the garment's gender associations, from male cloak to female dress, Poiret distinguished the garment from its African origins in order to make it his own. Certainly, Poiret's references to non-Western cultures cannot be separated from the power relations at work between colonizer and colonized; transforming a male African garment into a female Western one reverberates with the Orientalist discourse of the day, one element of which was a feminization of African culture. As Jones and Leshkowich have noted: "… Orientalism emerged in the colonial era as a mode of knowledge production that defined 'the Orient' as fundamentally 'other, feminine, and perpetually inferior' to the West in ways that supported colonial domination."[45] Poiret's dress, thus, embodies multiple aspects of France's construction of/ use of the African "other."

In another reference to Africa, Poiret created an evening gown called "Nubian" in 1924. Here, his approach is not mimetic, yet the garment creates associations with Africa by other means. The primary connection is textual—the name of the dress resonates with the distant and the exotic. Nubian refers to a region and ethnic group in southern Egypt and northern Sudan, and likely more important for Poiret's purposes, to an ancient kingdom in the same region. Nubia, also known as Kush, was one of the earliest complex societies in the Nile Valley, predating Egypt's first dynasty. Westerners first became aware of Nubia in the 1820s, when it was heralded as a remnant of the Biblical past. Archaeological excavations that took place from 1917 to 1924—just as Poiret was naming his design—uncovered pyramids, dramatic sculptures, and gold objects. With these associations, the name "Nubian" would likely have evoked a generalized sense of the distant, exotic, and mysterious.

The accessories worn with the Nubian gown in its best-known fashion illustration, from the May 1924 issue of the fashion magazine *Art, Goût, Beauté*, include layered armlets and bracelets, each plain and monochromatic, perhaps made of wood or ivory. The image calls to mind the bracelets worn in great profusions by famous Afrophile Nancy Cunard in her 1926 portrait by Man Ray, in which the layered bangles were a stylistic statement of her affinity for African cultures—one element of her controversial persona during that era. Ivory or wooden bracelets, worn in profusion, appear with some frequency in early-twentieth-century French representations of African women.[46] Distinguishing the influence of art deco style from that of the *coloniale modern* is difficult for, as Archer-Straw notes in her analysis of the fashion influences of *l'art nègre* (the fad for African music and art in 1920s France), "Once married with art deco, *l'art nègre*'s references in fashion were subtle but still significant. The

45 Carla Jones and Ann Marie Leshkowich, "Introduction: The Globalization of Asian Dress: Re-Orienting Fashion or Re-Orientalizing Asia" in *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress*, Sandra Niessen, Leshkowich, and Jones, eds. (New York: Berg, 2003), 6.

46 A survey of the African women depicted in French advertisements, many featuring stereotyped images of Africans, reveals that African women dressed in their "native" garb frequently wear more than one bracelet on each arm. Raymond Bachollet, Jean-Barthélemi Debost, Anne-Claude Lelieur, *Négripub L'Image des Noirs dans la Publicité* (Paris: Somogy, 1992).

Figure 2
Rodier display, Exposition Coloniale Internationale, Paris, 1931. From Excelsior Modes (summer 1931).

style encouraged the use of black and white as a color combination, the wearing of head-wraps and turbans, and the popularity of the ostrich feather, hanging earrings, chokers, pendants, and bangles."[47] Certainly the dress itself has an art deco sense of simplicity and geometry. In this instance, textual information surrounding the garment enhances its association with African identity.

Several of Poiret's African-influenced designs were created in fabrics the designer commissioned from the Rodier textile firm. Rodier, founded in the mid-nineteenth century, continues today to create luxury fabrics and clothing. Poiret worked with Rodier in 1912, and again in 1918 and 1921, to create a group of coats and dresses based on Moroccan textiles and garment styles.[48] Rodier created numerous other African-influenced textiles during the first decades of the twentieth century. A 1923 appraisal of colonial influences on French textile design provided a global tour of the company's sources of influence via the names assigned to the fabrics: "These names parade by like a dizzying fantasy. There are Moroccan fabrics, le *Marokaïa*, le *Djellaba* de *Ba Ahmed*, d'*Azemour*, d'*El Hajeb*, de *Khorasan*, de *Jaïani*; there's the crepe called *Togo*, the fabric called *Tougui*, which interpret Soudanic themes; there's the crepe *Majunga* and the *Djersador de Mampikong*, which borrow their designs from Madagascar; Asia, finally, so rich in beautiful decorative compositions, has provided its contingent: *Indina* gauzes, *Hindoussaïa* scarfs, *Angkor* scarves."[49]

Rodier's African-style fabrics employed both mimetic and reproductive approaches, augmented by these textual references to "exotic" non-Western locales. In 1931, the company produced a series of fabrics that were featured in a vitrine at the colonial exposition. (Figure 2) Along with adaptations of bold patterns that call to mind Polynesian tapa cloth, the vitrine features several mimetic references

47 Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 77.

48 Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton, *Poiret* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 79, 110.

49 Guillaume Janneau, "Le Mouvement Moderne: Nos Colonies Inspiratrices d'Art," *La Renaissance de l'Art Francais* (June 1923): 379–385.

Figure 3
Reliquary figure, Fang, Southern Cameroon and Northern Gabon, wood, metal, H: 42.5 cm (17"), The Stanley Collection, University of Iowa Museum of Art. Photograph by Steven Tatum.

to Africa—elephants and a pattern that appears to be abstracted masks. Most dramatic, however, is the textile featured prominently in the center of the vitrine: the length of fabric is adorned with a large figure, its arms and legs flexed, wearing a minimal loincloth, bracelets, anklets, and a necklace. The textile design is clearly a reference to the reliquary figures of the Fang and related people, of what was then French Equatorial Africa. (Figure 3) The figures already were icons of African sculpture; their smooth surfaces and elegant symmetry well suited to the tastes of the era. The textile is clearly the focus of Rodier's vitrine, and it was featured in a full-page spread on Rodier textiles in a fashion magazine that summer.[50]

The "colonial" designs of another textile manufacturer, Lesur, also featured a depiction of an African sculpture: "Finally, Chastel [the designer] has recreated for a subtle scarf a mask of those curious African divinities, sculpted from wood with a singular vigor of expression, despite the naivety of the technique."[51] Other designs feature figures bearing loads on their heads (called "Le Marché"), and palm trees ("Les Palmes"). The image of Africa created by the fashions and textiles of the era were clearly focused on the flora, fauna, and "primitive" religious practices of these distant cultures. "Tradition" is at the core of these representations—the wild, the distant, the untouched Africa. Meanwhile, in Africa, French and other colonial powers were working to reshape the cultures they encountered using images of Africa's "traditions" to garner public support for their efforts.

Conclusion: Plus Ça Change?

> 1931: "From Madagascar, we took this belt made of woven straw.… The large, chiseled silver bracelet was copied at the Angkor temple, the large hat comes directly from the Cameroon pavilion."[52]
>
> 2002: "Like a faint whiff of patchouli, the hippie spirit lingered over fall's collections, as designers made boho-inspired stops in Africa, Scandinavia, South America, and the Tyrol."[53]

While the era of colonialism in Africa is past, and the evolutionary model undergirding Western efforts to "civilize" Africans has been entirely discredited, Africanisms in French and other Western fashion design continue to emerge out of a globetrotting, decontextualized, and ahistorical practice of borrowing that differs little from early-twentieth-century practices. In fact, Africa recently has been the subject of numerous fashion designers' flights of fantasy. In 2005, Suzy Menkes, a leading fashion journalist, predicted that global fashion markets were on the verge of creating "a fashion first: a popular movement that sees the beauty and craft in sub-Saharan Africa."[54] In 2009, she again wrote of Africa's presence on the

50 "Quelques modèles des intéressants tissues de RODIER créés spécialement pour l'exposition coloniale," *La Renaissance de l'Art Français* (May 1931): 256.
51 Paul Sentenac, "Les Tissus coloniaux de Lesur," *La Renaissance de l'Art Français* (August 1931): 263.
52 "Des Bibelots Pris à l'Exposition Coloniale Orneront Nos Costumes de Plage," *Femina* (August 1931): 20.
53 "Globetrotting," Style.com (2002). (www.style.com/trends/trend_report/072902/index.html)
54 Suzy Menkes, "Next Stop, Africa." *The New York Times Style Magazine* (Spring 2005): 60.

runways, speculating about the relationship between fashion and politics: "And is the current design passion for Africa a recognition of Barack Obama's roots?"[55] Africa has appeared in diverse guises including Jean-Paul Gaultier's 2004 women's haute couture designs that were African-themed, with dresses named "Kilimanjaro," "Bambara," "Abidjan," and "Ashanti." In 2003, Donna Karan's New York runway show was an "Ode to Africa" that used the sound of a drumbeat on the soundtrack, and presented "red-brown colors, frayed hems, and broad-fringed belts that engulfed the short hems of draped jersey dresses."[56] Other designers who have made use of African images or themes since 2000 include Kenzo, Miguel Androver, and Dolce and Gabbana.

While the processes by which these and other designers make use of African forms and imagery differs little from past practices (although the garments that result are certainly not copies of early-twentieth-century Africanisms) a new layer of complexity is added through the presence of African designers in contemporary fashion markets. African fashion designers are themselves participating in the international sartorial discourse on Africa. In 2009, New York Fashion Week included the first major runway show devoted solely to African designers.[57] While not many designers from Africa have attained wide visibility outside their countries of origin, several have received international attention. Their expressions of their African identities vary widely, but all struggle to avoid being confined by the label "African designer." Many engage with, and sometimes subvert, the expectations that have been created by a long history of exoticism in Western fashion markets.

One of the best known contemporary African designers is the Anglo-Ghanaian designer Ozwald Boateng, who is based in London. He has received numerous national and international fashion awards and, in 2003, was named creative director of the French fashion house Givenchy's menswear division—a prominent position for any designer. In 2006, he became the subject of an American reality television show called "House of Boateng," which followed his efforts to break into the American fashion market. From his exclusive menswear shop on Savile Row in London, Boateng has worked to revive the British tradition of bespoke tailoring, in which clothing is made for each individual client without using a pattern. In many respects, his style is quintessentially British; he won the British Menswear Designer of the Year Award in 2001. Sharply tailored suits, morning coats, and jodhpurs—all typically European—are hallmarks of his work.

In 2001, Boateng created his first explicitly African line of clothing, called "Tribal Traditionalism." In one interview, he offered insight into the pressure an African designer may feel as international markets expect him to create distinctively African fashions: "Last season, I produced a collection called 'Tribal Traditionalism.' …. For the first time in my life, I felt ready to express my cultural

55 Suzy Menkes, "The Bright Continent," *New York Times Style Magazine* (Spring 2009): 118.

56 Suzy Menkes, "Color Lauren Rosy—The Collections: New York," *International Herald Tribune* (September 23, 2003): 7.

57 The designers were: Xuly.Bët, Stoned Cherrie, Tiffany Amber, and Momo. I attended the show, which featured Grace Jones as a runway model, as well as several well-known black models from Africa and elsewhere. The show received a good deal of attention in the New York fashion press. Guy Trebay wrote in *New York Times* of the show's potential impact: "For at least a half-hour, there was the sense that Western fashion might finally move toward integrating itself with the larger world." Guy Trebay, "Revealing New Layers of African Fashion," *New York Times* (February 14, 2009).

and ancestral spirituality in a collection. I allowed the spirit and colors of Africa to flow through everything that I created. At long last, I felt the confidence to do this without feeling stereotyped."[58] Boateng's designs present his own version of Africa—an urban, cosmopolitan style that does not depend on explicit reference to forms associated with traditional cultures. The name of the line, Tribal Traditionalism, seems to deliberately engage the long history of non-African constructions of African cultures. In 2004, Boateng again made explicit reference to his African heritage with a collection entitled "Ashanti Hip Hop" that also interpreted his own experience of African identity rather than drawing from symbols of African tradition.

From Poiret to Boateng, fashion design offers insights into the cultural construction of the African "other" and the significance of dress as a tool for negotiating shifting control over the power to define identities and traditions. This analysis of the deployment of fashion in French representation of the cultures of its African colonies reveals the struggle to absorb yet maintain distance from these cultures. More recently, the long history of clothing as a key signifier of a stereotyped African "other" has provided fodder for African fashion designers, who use the same medium to offer a counter-discourse. The apparent ingenuousness of fashion, which is widely perceived to be aimed at nothing more than a season of in the realm of chic, is arguably an important source of its power to make profound yet subtle cultural statements.

58 Nanabanyin Dadson, "Ozwald Boateng: Exclusive Interview," *Agoo* 1:2 (April-June 2002): 32.