

Refashioning Africanness as a Lifestyle: Vlisco Fabrics and Wax Cloth Fashion in Ghana

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Abstract

Of central concern in our paper is the commercial and ideological creation of an 'Afropolitan' aesthetic by means of African wax cloth fabrics. We focus on two interrelated topics: the cloth designs and marketing campaigns of Dutch textile producer Vlisco, as well as fashion designers in Ghana who use wax cloth. Our paper sheds light of the on-going entanglement of the local and global in fashion-worlds and the creation of cultural authenticity at the nexus of textile and fashion.

Part I: VLISCO

Wax textiles have been embedded in a long and complex history of economic and cultural trafficking. Originally an Indian and Chinese product, subsequently widely practised and worn in Indonesia, imitated by Dutch and British companies, unsuccessfully brought back into the Indonesian market and ultimately successfully transferred to West-Africa where it became authenticated and seen as an icon of 'Africanness'. Without doubt, the wax textile is part and parcel of a multifaceted process of economic and cultural encounters, contestations and hybridizations. From the second half of the 19th century the Dutch company Vlisco has played a key role in the production and dissemination of wax textiles in West and Central Africa. Last decade, not in the least because of the enormous influx of cheap Chinese imitation wax, Vlisco has launched a new strategy in which it transformed itself from textile-company into a high fashion brand, targeted to the African upper and middle classes.

In the first part of this paper we will try to gain insight, with the help of analyses of the aesthetics and narratives of Vlisco advertising materials, which definitions of fashionability, beauty and Africanness this company creates and disseminates. How does the company merge the seemingly paradoxical oppositions of fashion, as constant renewal on the one hand and African 'tradition' on the other, and what do these definitions mean in terms of African and Afropolitan identities? A second, related, paradox that we will analyse is the way Vlisco unites an understanding of (fashion) identity as both essentially African *and* cosmopolitan.

Part II: The role of wax textile in Ghanaian fashion

In the second part of the paper we will focus on the appropriation of wax cloth in general, and Vlisco textile in specific, amongst consumers as well as designers in Ghana. The first president Kwame Nkrumah stimulated local fashion to counter cultural alienation and create national pride. Exemplary is the long skirt with matching top (*kaba and slit*) that is customarily made from wax textile. The influence of national heritage discourses on the current fashion scene in capital city Accra is still visible. At the same time, fashion designers in Ghana use wax fabrics as a resource in styling an 'Afropolitan' aesthetic and beauty ideal that transcends national boundaries in seeking access to a global fashion world. This process is part and parcel of the liberalization and globalization of Ghana's public arena, economic growth and the global fashioning of African culture as a consumer life style. We use wax cloth as a compelling window in analysing the relation between Ghanaian fashion, changing heritage formations and globalisation in the last decade.

Textile producer Visco and Ghanaian designers both redefine the old 'tradition' versus 'modernity' binary. We conclude our paper by analysing how the two actors are interrelated: how do they influence, reinforce and, at times, oppose each other? And how does wax cloth(ing) relate to the broader and commercial process of a trans-national revitalization of African culture and 'tradition' in the global identity economy?