

Africa, Meet Africa: Concoctions of Identity in West African Textiles

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Abstract

At a fashion show in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso in West Africa, a collection of western-designed, locally-made fashion is being presented for the first time by a UK development charity. Their mission is to instill cultural pride amongst the Burkinabé for their indigenous textiles, with the *défilé de mode* being staged to illustrate the potential of traditional cotton strip-weaving as a fashion fabric for Euro-American markets. 400 local dignitaries, together with western delegates from an international cotton conference, are gathered around an elaborate set constructed over a hotel pool. Their lavish, four-course banquet has already been served and tidied away. There is an expectant hush. To the sound of drum beats and chanting the first model appears - a young boy of about 12 years, naked except for a short, frou-frou skirt made from ecru cotton strip-weaving and cotton pompoms around his ankles. Africa, meet Africa!

This paper presents a case study of a collaborative fashion collection which epitomizes the conflicting western notions of 'tradition,' 'modernity,' 'authenticity' and 'taste' in a cultural sector development context.

The research addresses questions that are relevant to contemporary Africa. What is the sociology of western-driven, 'deeper luxury' fashion projects which link famous designers with artisanal production in developing countries? Can the identity of the products as an *idea* of Africa in this context be described as a construction of smoke and mirrors; an implied exoticism whose character has been shaped by a long history of colonialism and postcolonialism? How are such development projects situated within modern, global, multi-billion dollar African fashion and textile systems?