

Why Africa? Why Now? The Designs of Ade Bakare

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ABSTRACT

Ade Bakare's designs featured in a Lagos (Nigeria) gallery's retrospective exhibition of his work in June 2013. I was drawn less by his elegant sketches than by his use of historic Yoruba textiles and textile design techniques to complement gowns and dresses, less African in style than Western. Bakare was born and educated in the UK, and his early career was firmly based in European fashion. He provides excellent self-documentation through his website, press-cuttings, and a battery of sketchbooks. After graduating from Manchester University College, Bakare worked in London's fashion industry from the early 1980s, establishing his own label in 1991. However, the first reference to Africa in his timeline does not occur until 2002, twenty years into his career. Since then he has developed an active relationship with the Nigerian world of high fashion. He became the official designer for First Lady Stella Obasanjo in 2004, opened his Lagos boutique in 2006, and established the Young Designers Creative Competition in 2007. In this paper, I propose to look at Ade Bakare in both his London and Lagos fashion worlds to explore the broadening of his fashion identity in the last decade to reference not only his Nigerian family background but his own Yoruba ethnicity. This paper will draw on Bakare's archive of materials as well as an in-depth discussion with him on his work and on an up-coming fashion show in London that is being sponsored by Nigeria's Ogun State and that will feature his designs in *adire*, resist-dyed cloth.

Most academic studies of African Dress and Fashion tend to be made from the perspective of those wearing the clothing and the impact they want to make on the people around them, or the Western designers whose creations perpetuate “primitivist notions of an imagined Africa” (Keller, 2013, 189), rather than from the perspective of the African designer. However, as Vicki Rovine (2006

http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=5754&texte_recherche=Rovine

accessed Oct. 20, 2013) has pointed out, there is a small but growing literature that has begun to address the work of Africa's *haute couture* fashion designers, including van der Plas and Willemsen (1998), *Revue Noire* (1997), Mendy-Ongoundou (2002), Mustafa (2002), (add: L'Afrique C'est Chic), and Rovine (2004). The focus of this paper is one designer, Ade Bakare (figure 1), and his personal and continuing journey through fashion design—from Africa to Europe and back—and the resulting nuanced character of his collections. Only relatively recently, nearly a decade ago but some twenty years into his career, did he begin to incorporate into his garments textile types and designs



Figure 1

characteristic of his own ethnic background, raising the questions: Why Africa, Why Now?

Bakare was born in the UK (Bromsgrove in Worcestershire, England). He studied Fashion Design at Salford University College, Manchester, where – as a mature student -- he gained an HND (Higher National Diploma) in 1990.¹ He then went to work for two internationally known London designers, Victor Edlestein and Christina Stambolian, before setting up his own label in 1991, with the help of a grant from the Prince's Youth Business Trust (PYBT). By the late 90s, he was selling his own collections twice a year (spring/summer and autumn/winter) to boutiques--*Chic* of Hampstead, *Adele Davis* of Bond Street, *Lucienne Phillips* of Knightsbridge and *Ambers* of Amersham. Demand for designs from private clients encouraged him to open his own salon on Grosvenor Street in Mayfair in 1996. His clientele is international, European and American, Nigerian and Jamaican, and his career is firmly based in Western fashion.



Figure 2

¹ For those unfamiliar with the British system of education the Higher National Diploma is best described as a two-year full-time or three-year part-time course, which once completed can lead to entry on the final year of a course. HND courses are vocational in nature as they prepare you for careers in specific areas of industry.

Bakare provides excellent self-documentation through his website (www.adebakare.com), press-cuttings, and a battery of sketchbooks.² He has held several retrospective exhibitions, the most recent in 2013 at Terra Kulture, a gallery in Lagos, where I first saw his work. Given my own orientation as an Africanist art historian focused on historic forms, I was drawn less by his sketches, reminiscent in their elongated elegance of the art deco drawing style of Erté, than by his use of historic Yoruba textiles and textile design techniques to complement gowns and dresses, less African in style than Western.



Figure 3

However, his bio and timeline do not reference his Nigerian (Yoruba) origins, or provide any information on the length of time he has lived in Nigeria. The first reference to Africa in his timeline occurs only in 2002, over twenty years into his career. Since then he has developed an active relationship with the Nigerian world of high fashion. He became the official designer for First Lady Stella Obasanjo in 2004, opened his Lagos boutique in 2006, and established the Young Designers Creative Competition in 2007.

An interview with Ade Bakare at his Lagos boutique on Victoria Island in July 2013 revealed that though born in England, he attended secondary school and university in Nigeria, earning a degree in history at the University of Lagos. Only after he had accomplished this, to satisfy his mother, did he feel free to return to a long-held ambition, to study fashion design. Thus he returned to England and as a mature student did his HND in Manchester. As noted earlier, he worked in British fashion houses and began his own line in 1991. His timeline notes, besides major shifts like beginning his own couture business in 1996 with a Mayfair address and opening his boutique on Lagos's Victoria Island in 2006, important commissions, awards, and achievements. He designed costumes for Anglo-Nigerian actress Caroline Chikezie (1997) for the movie *Spin* and in 2008, for Anglo-Nigerian Steve Gukas's movie *A Place in the Stars*. His ensembles were featured in a Sunday Times Royal Ascot supplement in 1998, and he created Lady Caroline Pearson's Royal Ascot ensemble in 2001. In 1994 he was selected as one of the up and coming British designers to represent Britain at the "Best of British" Expo in Vienna, and in 1998 was given special recognition by Natwest and Western Union as African Business Man of the Year. Besides his name and photograph, this is the first reference to African heritage on the timeline.

The very western orientation of his training and work, as well as his emphasis on couture distinguishes Bakare from some of his younger compatriots who, though often not working in Nigeria, focus on a mass market audience (e.g. Duro Olowu and the line he has created for J.C. Penney) and on an almost strident use of African identity design. When questioned about "Why Africa?" and "Why now?"—Bakare responded by saying that when asked as a student and fledgling entrepreneur why he did not incorporate some element of his own background, something African, into his designs, he did not truly understand what they meant. During his

² Biographical information is drawn from his website, newspaper articles accessed on-line that themselves draw largely from his website, his retrospective exhibition labels, a long interview on July 29, 2013, and email correspondence since then.

formative years growing up and going to school in Nigeria, everything was Western – clothes, shoes, movies... No one, at least no one his age, was interested in “African” dress. It was not until he visited South Africa in 2005 that he understood what drawing from “African” culture meant. In his own words:

I remember at college they used to ask me “why don’t you inject something African into your collection...” And I had no idea what they were talking about. And when I graduated, I took my collection around to prospective fashion houses, and fashion magazines like Vogue and Harper’s and Queen...and Tattler—and they said: But we can’t see anything of your culture in what you do... but my thinking was that fashion was international and so why should it have to be whittled down to an individual culture – but that was in part because I didn’t really understand what they were talking about... I didn’t know what “African” culture was ... So it was later on, when I was invited to South Africa, to do a fashion show there, ...[that] I said to myself, Hmmm, I’m going to try adapting African fabrics...And so I used *aso oke* (narrow band weaving historically done by Yoruba men) in one or two out of about twelve designs... (Ade Bakare, July 29, 2013) .

According to Bakare, the South Africans did not understand his style or even his reference to Africa. They saw his collection as harking back to the 1960s, to an African-American “church” look because of the way the dresses were accessorized with hats, shoes and bags. He notes that accessories are part of couture orientation, even though the South Africans perceived them as “African American.”

Bakare continued his commentary: [However] “when I saw what the South African designers (both Black and White) were doing, I was gobsmacked!” I couldn’t believe how much they drew from African culture. I found it inspiring, and it made me determined to bring something African, [in this case, something Yoruba], to his next group of designs.

He returned to South Africa in 2006 with an ensemble consisting of a headpiece inspired by a Yoruba crown with a fringe of beads covering the model’s face and a flowing cape with beadwork around the neck. His first thought was to put a dress beneath the cape, recalling one of his signature designs—a jacket paired with dress or trousers. The model walked down the runway, turned, and then dropped the cape – causing a furor. She wore a bikini of gold lace and her body was wrapped in beads —evoking a pre-colonial style of dress and decoration for young women. Flashbulbs popped, and it was on the front page of all the papers the next day. Bakare went to Capetown, Durban, and Johannesburg on this trip. He said: “Would you believe it was the same reaction in all three cities? And always the front page the next day” (July 29, 2013). If the South African fashion world could not read Yoruba textiles as “African,” it clearly had no trouble recognizing beads.



Figure 4

That was an important turning point in terms of his introducing African elements (read Yoruba again) into his designs. As he put it: “I simply went African” (July 29, 2013). He set his design team to research African textiles, particularly Nigerian traditional fabrics, and settled on *adire* (see figure 15). The Yoruba term *adire* literally means “to tie and dye” (Barbour 1997: 1) and is the term used for indigo resist dyed fabric, as well as (now) for any resist dyed fabric—whether tie-dyed or batiked. In collaboration with his team, Bakare developed a modern concept through which he could utilize these techniques. Equally important for his label, however, was that he was already established in England and had a customer base that did not expect him to be “African” in his designs. He was not categorized as an ethnic designer which left him free to introduce African effects without impinging on his status and reputation as an international designer.

Bakare incorporated not only *adire* (figure 15 – a detail from a traditional indigo starch resist cloth) but also an historic cloth called *aso oke* (figure 14), traditionally woven by men on the



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

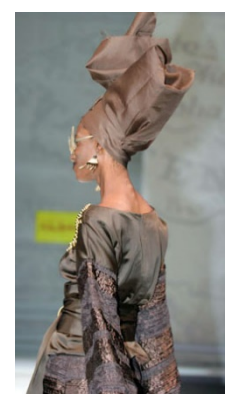


Figure 8

narrow band loom and used to make prestige garments for both men and women. Indeed, today, many Nigerian weddings involve two sets of bridal wear. For the Yoruba, the “traditional” set is often made from *aso oke*, either historic cloth from a family treasury as was used to make the garment in figure 5 or recently woven versions of the cloth as in the bundle of strips shown in figure 14. He incorporates *adire* into jackets, blouses, and gowns (see figure 11), featuring a painted pattern called basket weave (figure 6) that resembles



Figure 9



Figure 10

a long linked chain and evokes patterns created by tying cloth before dyeing it. Indeed, this has become his signature “African” pattern used on coats, dresses, and his new line of silk scarves. Though he often uses it with a deep indigo blue, indigo having been used historically as the dye

for making *adire*, and a classic base color in couture, he departs from this Yoruba practice to make his designs more “African” by using vibrant color (TK label 2013), as in the dress Ade is holding in figure 7. Bakare also has used *aso oke* as sleeves or skirts within ensembles as well as a kimono cut, both seen in figure 5, though the “kimono” cut is often used interchangeably with the term “caftan” cut in “fashion speak.” His recent ensembles include “hats” or “headgear” that evoke classic Yoruba headties called *gele* (figure 8) as well as Islamic scarves. Beading, though in distinctive, if sometimes overlapping styles, features on many of his designs, not only those that reference Africa. If you know Nigerian “up and down” dresses, you might also recognize an African reference in the fitted and flared gowns shown in his 2013 collection (figure 10). Though the tailors’ pattern books are filled with variations, the more recent “up and down” is a separate but fitted over blouse, sometimes incorporating a satin or silk-like fabric that complements the color of the dominant fabric, and a long, fitted skirt that flares at the knee. Several variations of this form can be seen in the pattern book page illustrated in figure 9.

Recurring elements in Bakare’s work are the jacket dress (a variant, the jacket blouse), a creative emphasis on sleeves, and subtle beading or embroidery at accent points – neckline, cuffs, bodice. In the jacket and dress or trouser ensemble, the dress has a companion but dramatically contrasting jacket in a length that depends whether the ensemble is evening or day wear (figures 11 and 12). His garments feature clean lines, reinforced by his use of solid colors with the accents provided by *aso oke* or *adire*,



Figure 13

rather than the visually complex cotton prints known as Ankara in Nigeria, Dutch Wax or simply African prints elsewhere.

Besides a distinctive cut, Bakare focuses on natural fabrics – silks, linens, the finest of cottons when those are used (though as he points out, cotton is *not* a luxury fabric), wool, cashmere. Even though much of the fine handwork on his couture garments is done in England, creating resist patterns and dyeing the cloth, is done in Africa, and in Lagos rather than Abeokuta, the historic home of Yoruba *adire*. Bakare was advised not to ask the Abeokuta dyers to work with his fabrics and dyes since they are more conservative than those who have come to work in Lagos, the business capital of the country.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Indeed, one of his best craftsmen was a Ghanaian dyer who has recently retired and gone home, so that Bakare has had to discontinue offering one of his loveliest (in my opinion) costumes to customers (figure 12).

Bakare does not offer a mass market line of garments. However he does have two lines – the couture line that is commissioned either as a new design or based on one of his samples, but made to measure for the client – and a diffusion line that he sells in his boutique. The couture line is made in England. There is a lot of hand skill involved, and the prices are higher. According to Bakare, the diffusion line, called Bakare Breeze like his designer perfume, is more affordable, more youthful and has more minority appeal. It is aimed at Nigerians, and he pointed out several garments on the rack in his showroom that he described as more African--a caftan, a tie-dyed gown, and a dress incorporating a lace neckline. Rather than calling it African Modern, one of the names initially proposed for the diffusion line, Bakare used the name selected for his designer fragrance Bakare Breeze. This had the advantage of clearly linking the diffusion line with the main label, and implying a fresh and youthful look. As the line is re-launched, it has also taken on a more African influenced look.

Bakare is not only an accomplished designer, but also an excellent businessman, savvy in his marketing strategies. He knows what he wants to do, and he understands what he must do in order to accomplish his goals. In describing the trajectory of his career, he notes a period of disenchantment with the “business” end – when he decided (unsuccessfully) to seek work in one of the major fashion houses in France or the United States. He was told that he was too far along in his own career, having developed a characteristic design style, to work successfully for someone else, where he would have to subordinate this. He did use his opportunity, however, to research American fashion and to develop a business plan for an American bridal wear business working through such large department stores as Bergdorf Goodman. He never followed up on this, however, as his business picked up in the UK, he made a first fashion trip back to Nigeria (to judge the Ecofest event in Delta State along with Anglo-Jamaican model Valerie Campbell and football star and television presenter John Fashanu), and the international fashion world was in the early throes of a sea change in terms of recognizing non-Western designers.

The trips to South Africa in 2005 and 2006 marked a turning point in his career. Not only did he subsequently inject African elements into his designs, but he opened his Lagos (Victoria Island) boutique. He began reorganizing the diffusion line that he had developed earlier, having achieved what he describes as mild success with it in Nigeria. Not only is it on sale in his Lagos boutique but it is now available online through cityblis.com (<https://www.cityblis.com/adebakare>).

Ade Bakare does not consider himself an ethnic designer. I think this is clear from his visceral response to the question posed early on in his career regarding African elements in his work -- fashion is international and so why should it have to be whittled down to an individual culture -- and reinforced by the way he characterizes his own style and approach vis-à-vis younger African designers. He points out that there are not many African designers specializing in couture in the real sense of the word. Most, if trained at all, design ready-to-wear, so influences and directions vary a great deal. Most also aim at a much younger market. He sees his target market as more mature. He characterizes his own designs as thematic with slight developments or improvements over time, like luxury cars that maintain their “look” over decades. He says that he sees his own style as classic with a modern twist – but always glamorous. Glamour is why he specializes in couture.

Reflecting on the response of the couture houses in Europe and America to his work – surprise that he would want to subordinate his own label when there were so few (at the time) African couturiers and that he drew so beautifully, he has concluded that the designers who interviewed him had difficulty “seeing” his work because they did not expect Africans to produce a sophisticated form of dress. He now sees it as part of his mission to promote the elegance of Africa through his designs. Part of that process is to include African references in those designs, redressing the balance. He is careful to point out, however, that his clientele is international and therefore his collection must retain its classic appeal (personal communication, Nov. 2, 2013). So, now, most of his collections include garments with an African reference through the use of traditional textiles or African style cuts. These were non-existent in his work when he began in the early 90s.

Like many artists of African descent, he has had to negotiate the physical and psychological distance between Europe and Africa to carve out an identity that allows him to follow his muse



Figure 14

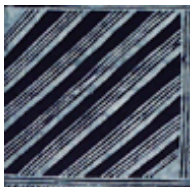


Figure 15



Figure 16

but also create a successful business. Part of that negotiation has been the creation of a consciously African identity revealed in his work through the use of traditional textiles. He said: Constantly traveling back and forth between London and Lagos, I have finally created an identity for myself which takes its influence from African culture, specifically Yoruba culture, via textiles (Nov.2, 2013). In one way this is a compromise, a recognition that as a man of African heritage, he must be “African” in his design approach to be accepted. However, negotiating this response also provided him with an opportunity to experiment creatively with different fabrics--Dutch wax or Ankara as it is called in Nigeria (figure 16) as well as Yoruba *aso oke*, the men’s strip weave (figure 14), and *adire* (figure 15). He settled on Yoruba *adire*, the resist-dyed fabrics and techniques from Ogun state, his home state, as the fabric/method with which he felt the most connection. *Adire* not only conveyed a richer heritage but also

allowed him to express his own “voice.” It involves techniques that are more adaptable than pre-printed cloth that carries not only strident patterns, but multiple colonial references in the case of Ankara, or that asserted a textural authority in terms of weave. Resist dyeing or *adire* involves processes that can be applied to the natural fibres that are signature elements of his collections. Ade maintains that *adire* gives him the opportunity to create his own designs, but still connect to tradition (Nov. 2, 2013).

Ade Bakare is a consummate designer and businessman. Lagos remains the business capital of Nigeria, and offers considerable opportunity to the entrepreneur. There is a growing art market there as well, though one that operates at a level distinct from the international market, since Nigerian collectors tend to want something more decorative and comprehensible than the International market (which itself, like International Fashion at the Couture level) represents only a tiny, if enormously wealthy, segment of the population. Given the importance placed on dress by Africans in general and Nigerians in particular, there is certainly opportunity for a culturally – or bi-culturally – savvy fashion designer. Becoming Stella Obasanjo’s official designer in 2004 must have brought him considerable prominence among Nigeria’s glitterati. Launching the Young Designer’s Creative Competition in 2007, a biennial event, keeps his name and designs in the Nigerian news. His retrospective exhibitions serve as vehicles for charting his own progress as well as publicity for his line, his boutique, his young designer competitions. Equally, they provide him with a vehicle for “giving back” – or participate in the “re-branding” of Africa to quote (along with numerous others) Nigeria’s president Goodluck Johnathan. He states quite clearly that he wants to help young Nigerians to see beyond the violence and corruption featured in the press. His competitions and the outreach programs associated with them allow him to do this. As he put it, it’s about role models, not about fashion. He wants the students to realize that anything they put their minds to, they can do, and be successful...but it takes time. It doesn’t happen overnight. However, it’s important to start early in life. So during his retrospective exhibitions, he brings in students from two state schools every day, kids who don’t have the opportunity to travel abroad or whose schools could not afford to bring them (July 29, 2013).

Why Africa? It was necessary, a business decision as well as a personal one. Why now? Global communications and technology have opened opportunities for people like himself. Why Nigeria? Nigeria has a growing economy (though there hasn’t been much trickledown effect) and is one of the world’s most densely populated countries. Of course, he is of Nigerian descent, proud of his Yoruba ethnic heritage, and – like a fellow trans-national artist Yinka Shonibare – bi-cultural. Like his fellow transnational artists, he is subject to the same questions (why no Africa in your designs?) and the same pressures (if you want to sell, you had better put some Africa into your designs)—and he has had to negotiate these paths just as they have had to. [insert Yinka Shonibare quote] However, unlike his fellow artists who appeal to the international Art Market though have little appeal at home in Nigeria, Ade Bakare seems to work comfortably in both arenas, and fashion, unlike art, allows for a broader cast – the couture line he values so highly and the diffusion line that enables him to reach a broader market. Moreover, fashion appeals to a cultural passion for clothing in Africa, and a willingness to allocate resources to satisfy that passion, that far outstrips the interest in visual art in sub-Saharan Africa.

This paper raises as many questions as it answers – though it does provide some insight into one designer and his response to the “where” question (where is the Africa in your design?) and his personal journey of discovery – finding his “inner” Africa, seeing Nigeria as a business site, and his reconnection with his Yoruba heritage via traditional textiles and as well as a response to the “now” question. However, has the fashion world changed to be more inclusive of people of African heritage? In some respects, the answer has to be yes, if articles in Forbes Africa (Oct. 31, 2013) and the Economist (Oct. 1, 2011) are to be believed.³ In some respects, the answer is no – if the focus of high fashion in New York, Paris, and Milan continues to appropriate aspects of disparate African cultures and repackage them to enhance the contrast between the “exotic other” and the “civilized West” (Wade 2008, Salami, 2011, Mohamud 2013).⁴

³ <http://www.africafashionweekny.com/2013/10/adiat-disu-iafrica-fashion-week-director-in-forbes-africa-october-issue/> accessed Nov. 3, 2013) and the Economist (Oct. 1, 2011--
<http://www.economist.com/node/21530989> accessed Nov.2, 2013)

⁴ Wade (<http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2008/07/04/african-people-as-props-for-white-femininity/> accessed Nov.3, 2013); Salami (http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/minna-salami/fashioning-africa-exotic-_b_968881.html accessed Nov. 3, 2013); Mohamud (www.africaontheblog.com/the-need-for-the-exotic-other/ accessed Nov. 3, 2013).