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A DOCUMENTATION OF AFRICAN TRADE CLOTHS IN THE PHILADELPHIA PORT OF HISTORY MUSEUM

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The Port of History Museum in Philadelphia houses a collection of textiles characteristic of the types the French were trading with Africa between 1880 and 1900 in the early stages of European colonial rule within that continent. The collection emerged in the era of 'cotton imperialism' when Europeans began competing with African cloth industries by importing their own cloths to Africa. (Johnson) The economic historian Hopkins reports that by the turn of the century textiles constituted "about a third of the value of total imports into French West Africa and about a quarter of total imports in British West Africa". (Hopkins, 177)

The Port of History collection significantly adds to our understanding of this trade in a number of ways. First of all, it identifies the actual manufacturers of the cloths. Secondly, it documents the channels through which they were transported to and within Africa. And, finally, it enables us to see the actual cloths.

The collection can provide such rich data because of its own curious history. While the 800 or more European-manufactured textiles were intended for trade to Africa, they were never actually sold to the African consumer. Instead, they found their way to several turn-of-the-century French expositions, such as the 1900 Exposition Universelle de Paris shown here, where they were exhibited by the French to advertise and boast, to the European community, of their commercial successes in their newly formed African colonies. John McKenzie argues that expositions after 1880 had become venues through which Europeans could make known to the public their "penetration everywhere of manufactured exports such as textiles...and all other hallmarks of the civilized world". (McKenzie, 97-99). After being exhibited, the cloths were donated (or sold) to the Port of History Museum in Philadelphia, then known as the Commercial Museum because of its own commercial interests.

This commercial and exhibition history immediately becomes apparent when we look at the collection. There are three aspects of it that I wish to stress in particular. The first is related to the condition of the cloths themselves. Many are just fragments of larger pieces. Some of the smallest are even joined with others to form a book of fabrics much like an upholsterer's sample book. It is clear from this mode of presentation that the cloths had been prepared for a display that would demonstrate the range of cloth designs offered through French trade.
Secondly, the cloths were given labels, many of which have remained intact. Some are the original trademark labels of the manufacturer and/or distributor of the cloth. The colorful label shown above identifies the manufacturer Edwards, Cunliffe, and Wilson of Manchester and Glasgow in Great Britain. Other types of labels, such as the one below, were added later for the purposes of exhibition and contain information pertinent to that context. Dating to the 1889 Paris Exposition where the cloth was exhibited, it is somewhat obscure what the meaning behind it was. This discussion of the trade will take into consideration the range of cloths traded, the identification and role of participating manufacturers and middlemen and the organization and complexity of the actual trading process. I will rely on the information from the labels to reconstruct the actions of the traders. I will then turn my attention to the designs on the cloths which will be used as evidence of the aesthetic impact the latter may have had on European cloth industries.

The final and perhaps most interesting aspect of the cloths are their wide range of designs, colors and textures. It is obvious that the majority of the Port of History cloths look remarkably familiar with African textiles, it is obvious that the designs will also enable us to measure the aesthetic impact the latter may have had on European cloth industries.

What does the Port of History textile collection tell us about the mechanics of the trade itself? My first observation is that the French trade in cloth was truly international in scope. Based on the collection alone, we know that the French were trading cloths from no less than seven countries. It is somewhat of a paradox that only a small portion of the cloths came from France itself in spite of its extensive cloth industry. Their contributions to this trade were mainly jacquards and printed cottons such as the Ashanti openwork pattern to a Yoruba textile of Nigeria utilizing a similar technique. This French-made printed cloth that I am now showing bears a striking resemblance to this Ashanti strip weaving known as Rente.

Using this brief overview as a foundation, I will now give the Port of History collection more detailed attention. I will rely on the information from the labels to reconstruct the organization and complexity of the actual trading process. This discussion of the trade will take into minimal light. This discussion of the trade will take into consideration the range of cloths traded, the identification and role of participating manufacturers and middlemen and the organization and complexity of the actual trading process. I will then turn my attention to the designs on the cloths which will be used as evidence of the aesthetic impact the latter may have had on European cloth industries.

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The Port of History collection confirms that the cloths were being channeled through at least two of these Senegalese trading centers, Goree and St. Louis. We are even told of the names of the importers in charge of each market. The cloth on the left was handled by the importer Ms. Felix Cros whose trading house is located on the island of Goree. The one on the right, a French-manufactured green silk and satin brocade, was handled through the trading house of Andre Aumont in St. Louis. African traders would come to these houses to purchase cloths in quantity. Interested only in selling the cloths to the Africans, they may not have known where they went beyond that point which is why such information is not contained on the cloths' labels.

To learn something about the traders and manufacturers themselves, either French or English, we can turn to the designs, and to some extent the labels, on the cloths. Not surprising, they reveal some rather Euro-centric if not racist attitudes on the part of the Europeans. It takes little imagination to interpret the meaning of this trademark for Edwards, Cunliffe, and Wilson, the English firm in the business of manufacturing and distributing cloths for African trade. It illustrates an Englishman shaking the hand of an African trader after the former has just arrived in Africa (note the water behind him) to sell him cloth. We know that it is cloth he is selling because of the bundle next to him which is bound with metal strips typical of the way the English transported cloth to Africa.

Also, the border illustrations contain white cowrie shells and open-ended metal rings known as a manilla. These are forms of money that were still being used in what is present-day Nigeria by the late nineteenth century. Before the British and French could introduce their own currency, they were obliged to acknowledge and even use the African forms of money if only to gain the respect of the African consumer.

The hearty handshake suggests that such respect was granted, or so the European would have wanted to believe. We also get the message that he thought himself superior to the African trader. In contrast to the latter, the British merchant is shown firm in his stance, frontally positioned, and placed on the right (i.e. good) side of the picture. Moreover, it is only the tree behind the African that bears a slithering snake because it is he that lives a wild, savage life in the bush. The European, shown next to a tree with no snake, is civilized by comparison.

Their notion of the African as savage-like, if not also ignorant, is even seen from one of the textiles in the collection. This English-made red cotton bandanna is printed with images of Africans shooting rifles into umbrellas being held like shields by other Africans. Did Europeans think Africans so ignorant that they would actually use umbrellas as shields or that they would enjoy wearing cloth with such belittling imagery? Or, perhaps, it was this attire, seen on a similar cloth in the collection, that they wished them to wear.

Unquestionably, Europeans were hoping that Africans would adapt to their European modes of dress, which would, afterall, make them seem more civilized. The contrast between European and African attire is obvious from this juxtaposition of photographs taken in Madagascar in 1910. 

In an effort to eliminate the latter form of dress, the French began exporting items such as waistcoats of flannel and wool jersey, shaped bonnets and an extensive array of woolen fabrics in the hopes that Africans would take to them. Much to their dismay, it was the French stationed in Africa who ended up making use of such attire. Africans, they discovered, preferred untailed cloth in cotton which was, afterall, their tradition and infinitely more practical for the hot African climate. Their unwillingness to compromise their traditions forced the French to succumb to African tastes and preferences.

To meet African specifications, it was essential that European cloth manufacturers become familiar with the traditions and tastes of the African people by observing and documenting indigenous cloth traditions as well as design, color, and construction preferences region by region. To my knowledge, one of the most detailed descriptions of a Senegalese loom and its mode of operation dates to 1848 suggesting that the French were already, at that early date, recording the local traditions as if anticipating the extensive cloth trade that was yet to come. (Rondot) By 1900 ethnographic accounts of Senegal and other parts of Africa abound with detailed information about modes of dress, customs, and local industries broken down by ethnic group or by region.  

The fruits of this labor can be seen in the Port of History cloths the majority of which, as stated earlier in this paper, consciously imitate indigenous African textiles. Examining this more closely, we see that their adherence to the African aesthetic was by no means generic in nature. Instead, cloths intended for trade to particular regions bore the cloth aesthetic from that area. In other words, cloths traded to Senegal resembled Senegalese weaving whereas the ones traded to Madagascar looked like weaving from that area
and so on.

In order to reproduce cloth that looked Senegalese, the French had to collect local cloths. Some of these were contained in the Port of History Museum. They also had to familiarize themselves with the technologies indigenous to the area. One was the horizontal, foot-treadle loom utilizing two or more heddles systems. Its distinctive feature was its long, narrow warp that extends several hundred feet in front of the weaver. The resulting woven strip was then cut and of the warpsave was used to make the standard width of cloth, usually five to six feet wide.

This weaving technology was supplemented with a tradition of indigo dyeing used to dye individual threads or whole cloths. Tie and sew resist techniques were employed to decorate the surfaces. The resulting aesthetic was one of either solid deep blue, blue and white checks, stripes and geometric designs. Sometimes the blue was so intense that it would rub off on your hands.

Likewise, the cloths that the European manufacturers traded to Senegal were predominantly blue and white and decorated mainly with stripes and geometric motifs. Like the African cloths, I found that the indigo on these cloths would also rub off on my hands, leading me to suspect that some might have been dyed after reaching Senegal.

The manufacturers even grappled with the problem of replicating cloths made up of narrow strips. Many of you know that the European looms were considerably wider than the African variety which made it impractical to weave narrow strips and then sew them together. Wishing to trade something resembling strip weaving, they invented a way to imitate it by doubling the warp threads at designated intervals to create the visual effect of seams. Their efforts to replicate were technically correct but the results lacked the marvelous sense of irregularity so typical of the African cloth aesthetic.

Cloth printing techniques were found to be an easier way to imitate complex African designs. They used them to imitate Senegalese sew-dyed and tie-dyed cloths, examples of which I show here. Printing was used rather effectively to replicate complex woven patterns such as weaving typical of the Mandjaques, a group of weavers from Guinee-Bissau who had migrated to Senegal. The original is shown in the black and white photo on the left while the English imitation, referred to on the label as "limeneas" is seen in color on the right.

Let us quickly turn our attention now to cloth traded to Madagascar. They are very different, precisely because of the distinctive cloth traditions in Madagascar. Unlike the narrow-strip loom typical of Senegal, and most of West Africa, the Madagascar weavers used either a horizontal loom secured close to the ground or sometimes a backstrap variety, each producing warps approximately two feet in width. Two panels would then be salvage sewn to create the larger piece. The dominant motifs were the stripe with colors varying from earth tones to bright yellows, reds, and greens. The materials were either raffia palm, fine cottons, or silks.

Either through trade or migration, some weaving in Madagascar may have come by way of Indonesia and other parts of the Far East. (Mack, 23) This would explain why Madagascar textiles have an Eastern quality to them in their texture, design, and color. Noting this, the French chose to trade cloths of Eastern origin to Madagascar, including this Indian cloth. Likewise, the English began manufacturing colorful, gauze-like cotton fabrics with border designs that resembled the indigenous textiles.

In conclusion, the Port of History collection offers us a rare opportunity to view aspects of the European trade in cloth to Africa at the turn of the century. This confirms my belief that museums are the repositories of historical documents through which history can be reconstructed. But, there are many questions that have yet to be answered. We know that the French continued to trade in cloth throughout the colonial period which ends in the early sixties. How did this trade evolve over time? For how long did European manufacturers continue to imitate African cloth in the manner we have seen? Do the European cloths intended for trade to Africa change significantly from what they had been at the turn of the century? What happened to English firms like Edwards, Cunliffe, and Wilson? Further research is needed to answer such questions.

1. I wish to thank Skidmore College for providing me with the Faculty Research Grant to travel to Philadelphia to study the Port of History collection.


3. The major centers for cloth production were Rouen, Mulhouse, Villefranche, Nimes, and Toulouse (Steiner, 107).

4. These photos appear in Gallieni, General 1908, Neuf Ans a Madagascar.
Textiles in Trade in West Africa
Brigitte Menzel

Textiles in Africa since some time have become a topic of research, much of which is focused on aspects of art. The at least equally important economic aspects (production, consumption, and trade) are still rather neglected.

When doing field research in West Africa it is impossible to overlook the fact that most of the textiles in use could not have been produced locally. This applies not only to the colorful printed cottons but as well to handmade textiles.

In Asante (Ghana) I found woolen fabrics, which obviously were hand-woven but must have come from somewhere else as sheep and goats in the forest zone have short hair, unsuitable for spinning. I saw such woolen textiles as floor covering in stoolhouses, as material on state umbrellas, *nsaa knyie*, of which the most important one is *katamanso*, protecting the Golden Stool and being a memorial for the lost battle of *katamanso*, 1826, as well as a lining of palanquins or covering of regalia like drums. For certain privileged persons can also be found as bed-covers such heavy blanket-like textiles. They are not only attributed protective but also healing properties. And are considered to be especially precious for this quality. To get even a tiny sample (Menzel 1973, 27/56) of an already completely tattered blanket covering the bed of an old lady of rank needed much convincing. The blanket I found bundled up in a stall in Kumasi market in 1973 was completely out of context there, as such textiles were never offered for sale in the open. No information was to be had from the seller; Bernhard Gardi suggested that it might have been brought to Ghana by *ogo* from Niger, in whose area such blankets were woven.*fig.1*.

My aged Asante informants were unanimous of the opinion that this woolen textile, which they all called *nsaa*, is the highest ranking of all traditional textiles in Ghana (which should read Asante, as they were giving information about Asante only). According to them, *nsaa* could only be acquired in *esirjm*, the grasslands of the north (e.g. the Sahel). In Salaga they could be bartered by the representatives of the *Asantehene* for 40 headloads of each 2000 kola nuts, or 5 healthy male slaves, or several ounces of gold dust (equivalent to about £8 Sterling). This was the rate of exchange in the "olden days" (before the turn of the century). Prices for more recent acquisitions they did not know. As almost all *nsaa* I was permitted to see or saw during ceremonies, were more or less threadbare, although they were treated with great care, I assume that supply has ceased even before tourists and the antique market began to take their share in this traditional trade. It would be interesting to know which textile will replace *nsaa* in its context of Asante culture if no replacements could be made for those worn away.

The name *nsaa*, given in Asante to this special kind of woolen fabric, could not be explained by my informants as to its meaning. Christaller in his dictionary, compiled well before the date of the first edition (1881) gives "a certain blanket from the interior of Africa;" (1933:128). Linguistic research is much needed, as the word...