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Michelle Willard

University of British Columbia, Michelle.willard@yahoo.ca

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History of Research on African Factory-Printed Cloth and Current Approaches in the Field

Michelle Willard
Department of Anthropology/Museum Studies
University of British Columbia
Michelle.willard@yahoo.ca

*Objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become. This is to contradict a pervasive identification in museum research and material culture studies which stabilizes the identity of a thing in its fixed and founded material form.*¹

If we were to interpret factory-printed cloths in their “fixed and founded material form” as Nicholas Thomas states, we would be looking at a novel commodity and technology introduced to Africa by Europeans. However, factory-printed cloth is a product of both African design and European technology, and has its beginnings in the colonial period. African people have worn this type of cloth for over 150 years. Originally printed in factories in Europe and then marketed in Africa, factory-printed cloth became a luxury good that West Africans assimilated into a pre-existing tradition of valuing cloth and using it to signify identity, status and prestige. Today, a large portion of the cloth is designed and printed in Africa and has been modified by West Africans to suit their own systems of meanings, preferences and style.

John Picton, when discussing factory-printed cloth, states that “...one might argue that these fabrics are the products of European industry...and this view may well account for their relatively late entry into the subject matter of African art-historical research.”² I agree with Picton, but in the field of anthropology, however, due to the previous lack of scholarship on urban contemporary African societies, the cloth was relatively overlooked in the past. Charles Piot explains: “For anthropologists, the remote village has long been the site par excellence of traditional culture – an outside, a place in which to locate the Other, a site of redemption at some remove from the metropole and the global system.”³ As factory-printed cloth is produced in cities in Africa and then acquires value from urban market women, the absence of studies focused on urban Africa led to the exclusion of the cloth.

The display of factory-printed cloths in museum exhibits of African textiles is one way in which to challenge customary portrayals of Africa. Many African textile exhibits in North America and Europe have tended to focus on hand-woven cloth such as *kente* which has been indigenously produced by textile artisans for hundreds of years in Ghana. Though *kente* may be regarded by some as the ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ cloth of Ghana, and sometimes more generally of Africa, factory-printed cloths are also culturally

¹ Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4.

² John Picton, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995), 24-25.

³ Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 178.

significant and authentic textiles of Africa.⁴

Viewing textiles as social practices being passed on is a suitable way with which to study factory-printed cloth. Elise Dubuc has described how anthropologists have come to look at clothing as “total social objects” and that an in-depth knowledge of a society can be gained by studying clothing in its entirety and not simply as art objects.⁵ Besides the current approach of viewing clothing as “total social objects”, even earlier social theory also suggests how cloth can be seen as having a “social life” as it moves through space and time over the years of change in a community.⁶

In 2001, Ghana Textiles Printing Company (GTP) broadcast a television commercial that depicted a large multi-generational Ghanaian family at a grand celebration. In the commercial all the family members are wearing factory-printed cloth and are smiling and dancing to Ghanaian music while folded factory-printed cloth is being passed from one family member to another family member. At the end of the commercial a woman’s voice states, “Ghana Textiles, Bringing Fabric to Life.” Here, the idea of factory-printed cloth being embedded in the social life of people is evident even in the marketing strategies employed by textile firms. In turn, I argue that the cloths are authentic because they are an intrinsic part of the social life of the people who use them.

A range of research has focused on factory-printed cloth. Ruth Nielsen addressed the history of the cloth and made recommendations on how to classify the cloth for museum collections.⁷ Mary Littrell looked at Ghanaian wax prints and the viewpoints of designers, distributors, sellers and consumers, and her work included a vast amount of ethnographic fieldwork.⁸ Christopher Steiner drew analogies between the designs on factory-printed cloth and the designs found on African woven cloth.⁹ Susan Domowitz addressed the communicative value of factory-printed cloth in West Africa and women’s roles in creating this system.¹⁰ Market women give names to these cloths and their success in the market depends on the names given. Judith Perani and Norman Wolff, Sandra Klopfer, Victoria Rovine and Kathleen Bickford discussed factory-printed cloth in relation to the

⁴ Factory-printed cloth is produced by skilled textile designers and technicians in Ghana and in other West African countries. I argue that it can also be considered an artistic production indigenous to many West African countries, and is therefore an authentic textile of the region.

⁵ Elsie Dubuc, “A Look at Clothing: Body and Substance,” *Material History Review*. Canada Science and Technology Museum. (56), (2002): 1-5. (Schneider and Weiner’s *Cloth and Human Experience*, (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989) began this movement by bringing women producers and users of cloth to centre stage while analyzing how women navigate social realms through cloth).

⁶ Appadurai’s *The Social Life of Things*, (Cambridge University Press, 1986) focuses on commodities as things that have social lives, and I apply this paradigm to cloth.

⁷ Ruth Nielsen, “The history and development of wax-printed textiles intended for West Africa and Zaire,” in *The Fabrics of Culture : The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, ed. Cordwell and Schwarz (New York: Mouton, 1979), 467-498.

⁸ Mary Ann Littrell, “Ghanaian Wax Print Textiles: Viewpoints of Designers, Distributors, Sellers and Consumers” (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 1977).

⁹ Christopher Steiner, “Another Image of Africa: Toward an Ethnohistory of European Cloth Marketed in West Africa, 1873-1960,” *Ethnohistory* 32 (2) (1985): 91-110.

¹⁰ Susan Domowitz, “Wearing Proverbs: Anyi Names for Printed Factory Cloth,” *African Arts*. 25 (1992):82-87.

process of the formation of identity.¹¹ Leslie Rabine examined the global flow of African factory-printed textiles and took a closer look inside the printing factories, while further adding to the debates on authenticity.¹²

Contemporary fabric artists also have contributed to debates on authenticity. Nigerian born British artist Yinka Shonibare uses factory-printed textiles to deconstruct what it means to be African and European.¹³ One of Shonibare's pieces, *How Does a Girl Like You Get to be a Girl Like You?*, consists of three headless mannequins dressed in elaborate Victorian style gowns made from factory-printed wax textiles. The role of factory-prints in African societies has also recently been documented in film productions. One recent film, *Mama Benz and the Taste of Money*, chronicles the textile trade in West Africa and the involvement of Vlisco – the largest textile printing company.¹⁴ A *Mama Benz* in Africa is the name for a woman who has acquired such wealth through her textile business that she can afford to buy a BENZ and drive about the streets of Ouagadougou, a true sign of prestige in West Africa (pers. observs. 1995, 2001).

Factory-printed cloths have also been exhibited. One of the earliest exhibits on factory-printed cloth, *In Praise of Heroes: Contemporary African Commemorative Cloth*, was curated by Anne Spencer in 1982. Spencer's exhibit statement was, "To read these cloths is to catch vivid glimpses in microcosm of the diversity of contemporary African life".¹⁵ More than ten years later, John Picton addressed the complex history of the cloth in the exhibit *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex*.¹⁶ Craig Subler curated *Everyday Patterns: Factory-Printed Cloth of Africa*, which included an essay by Bickford.¹⁷ Later, John Picton commented on commemorative factory-printed textiles in the catalogue for the exhibit *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*.¹⁸

There has been a variety of research completed on factory-printed cloth. However, there are some areas that remain unexamined. For instance, the process of collecting and

¹¹ Kathleen Bickford, "Knowing the Value of Pagne: Factory Printed Textiles in Cote d'Ivoire" (Ph.D diss., University of Indiana, 1995); Sandra Klopfer, "Re-dressing the Past: The Africanisation of Sartorial Style in Contemporary South Africa," in *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture*, ed. Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes, London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 216-231; Judith Perani & Norman Wolff, "Cloth and Dress as a Mirror of Culture in Africa," in *Cloth, Dress and Art Patronage in Africa*, (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 25-48.; Victoria Rovine, *Bogolan: Shaping Culture Through Cloth in Contemporary Mali*. (Smithsonian Press, 2001).

¹² Leslie Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion*, (Berg Publishers, 2002).

¹³ John Picton, "Yinka Shonibare: Undressing Ethnicity," in *African Arts*. 34 (3) (2001):66-73.

¹⁴ *Mama Benz and the Taste of Money*. Dir. Karin Junger (filmed in Burkina Faso and documents African women who sell VLISCO wax prints in the market) Netherlands 2002.

¹⁵ Anne M. Spencer, *In Praise of Heroes: Contemporary African Commemorative Cloth*. (Newark Museum September 14, 1982-February 27, 1983). (Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey 1982), 3.

¹⁶ John Picton, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, Lund Humphries Publishers, 1995).

¹⁷ Kathleen Bickford, "Everyday Patterns: Factory Printed Cloth of Africa," in *Everyday Patterns: Factory Printed Cloth of Africa* (University of Missouri-Kansas City Gallery of Art, 1997).

¹⁸ John Picton, "Colonial Pretense and African Resistance of Subversion Subverted: Commemorative Textiles in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, (Munich; New York: Prestel, 2001).

exhibiting factory-printed cloth and its communicative value in museum settings has gone unexamined. While I find the cloth to be particularly useful in dispelling preconceived notions of African culture and identity in museum and gallery exhibits, the cloth's communicative value in these settings almost certainly was not foreseen by the producers or users of the cloth, thus supporting Thomas' earlier point that, "objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become."

Recently in Canada, museum curators have used the cloth to enter into discussions of authenticity, culture, politics, and fashion practices. I entered into these realms with the exhibit *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration: Factory-Printed Cloths of Ghana* which opened during Black History month at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology in 2004. The collection and the exhibit were developed in collaboration with the Ghanaian Cultural Society of British Columbia.¹⁹

The exhibit highlights the major significance of factory-prints in Ghana and in West Africa in general. The communicative value of the cloth is pivotal in the exhibit. A section of the exhibit reveals how a society conducts political campaigns, advertises, votes and commemorates important leaders and guests. Fashion practices and women's power in selecting textiles, marketing and wearing them is also apparent. Most importantly it is demonstrated that factory-printed cloth is a popular, fashionable and authentic choice of dress in West Africa.

Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration: Factory-Printed Cloths of Ghana

Factory-printed cloth is used to communicate various social messages to the public, as well as commemorate numerous social events such as political party campaigns, birthdays, funerals and weddings. The collection on display at the UBC Museum of Anthropology is based on four textiles which were printed in Ghana between 1998 and 2001. These textiles commemorate important events that took place during this time. The four textiles are Bill Clinton's commemorative cloth, John Kufour's campaign and victory cloth, and Ashanti Chief Otumfuo Opokuware II's funeral cloth.

Collecting the cloth in Ghana in 2001 proved to be a greater challenge than I had thought. Commemorative factory-printed cloths are only printed once and worn for the occasion for which the cloth commemorates. After being worn to the event the cloth is stored away and comes to symbolize a period in a woman's life. In Ghana, older women may have over one hundred pieces of factory-printed cloth stored in their cloth boxes.²⁰ These cloths are not easily sold or given away. I met several elderly women who had Kwame Nkrumah's commemorative cloth in their collection and were unwilling to part with it.²¹

I visited printing factories such as Askosombo textiles in Accra to discover that they

¹⁹ I collected the cloth which accompanies field research in Ghana in 2001 under a collecting contract with the UBC Museum of Anthropology.

²⁰ Littrell, "Ghanaian Wax Print Textiles: Viewpoints of Designers, Distributors, Sellers and Consumers" (1977), 91.

²¹ Kwame Nkrumah was Ghana's first president and his cloth has taken on an "inalienable" nature due to Nkrumah's popularity. (see Annette Weiner. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, (California: University of California Press. 1992) Through the act of keeping the Nkrumah cloth women have defined themselves in an ineffable way.

discontinue commemorative textile designs after the event for which they were printed has ended. Therefore I wasn't able to purchase any textiles from the factories. As an election had just taken place in Ghana I was able to purchase two cloths in the market reflecting this event. The other two cloths I came upon through personal contacts and coincidence. I will now briefly go over the collection and highlight certain aspects of the exhibit *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration: Factory-Printed Cloths of Ghana*.

Bill Clinton's Cloth

In 1998, Bill Clinton, the former President of the United States of America visited Ghana. In Ghana, the image of Bill Clinton's face was printed onto a cloth, with the Ghanaian flag in the background. 'Why is Clinton's face on this cloth?' is the question the exhibit label asks visitors. I used Clinton's cloth to draw visitors to the exhibit. I placed hand-woven *kente* cloth, which has complementary colours to Clinton's cloth, adjacent in the exhibit. I did this in order to question customary representations of authenticity in African textile museum displays.

When Clinton's cloth was first shown to some of my acquaintances it rendered surprise and wonder. Why would Bill Clinton's face be printed onto a cloth and what was the purpose of this cloth? Why did I wish to bring back something like this for a museum collection and exhibit? Didn't I wish to bring back something more "traditional"?

However, the visit of Bill Clinton was an experience that many Ghanaians shared and which was marked by the production of cloth. This cloth now represents that experience. According to Brooks Robinson, Media and Public Affairs Representative for the United States of America in Ghana, Ghanaians perceived Clinton's visit as a chance for Ghana to be seen in the world as a place with a vision, not a backwards and primitive place, but a developing and participating part of world action and history. Clinton addressed Ghana from Independence Square, where Kwame Nkrumah addressed Ghanaians years before. Thousands of people had come to witness this event. Robinson, a resident of Ghana, hoped the visit of such a high profile person such as Clinton would be a chance for the world to hear Ghana's story.²²

Kufuor's Cloths

The election of John Agyekum Kufuor, the current President of Ghana, reflected culturally established Ghanaian political election procedures. Office headquarters were painted the colours red, white and blue, the chosen colours of the New Patriotic Party (NPP). Because of the dynamism of African politics, a whole intricate culture of representation exists. The endless posters, street art and various other paraphernalia such as calendars, cards, bumper stickers, billboards and the bombardment of the media, GTV (Ghana Television) leading the way of many, create an explosive political scene that's utterly dynamic. There is a sense of movement through time and it is invigorating compared to the static timelessness that Westerners have attached to objects of Africa. As a foreigner in Ghana I got a crash course in Ghanaian political history through cloth and other forms of media around me in my day to day activities surrounding the collection of the cloth. The exhibit itself reflects my contact with these other forms of media.

²² However, the White House had another agenda, which differed somewhat from Ghana's, where Clinton would be in the spotlight of course.

Two cloths were printed for the NPP, a campaign cloth to advertise the candidate John Kufuor, and a victory cloth when Kufuor did in fact win the elections (see figure 1).



Figure 1



Figure 2

The text on the NPP cloths, *asee ho*, is the slogan for the NPP campaign. Kufuor was often seen as he campaigned holding his hand up in a fist with his thumb pointed down. *Asee Ho* means the “bottom line”. This was to show the voters where to make their mark

on the ballot. In a country where for some illiteracy may intimidate a possible voter from even voting at all, Kufuor instructed everyone that his party is *asee ho*, the bottom line on the ballot.

Upon my return from Ghana, I collaborated with local Vancouver tailor Kesseke Yeo. Yeo tailored a *kaba* (blouse) and *slit* (skirt) out of the campaign cloth I collected to demonstrate how the cloth was worn in Ghana for the elections of 2000. Obviously the purpose of tailoring the cloth after it was collected was to demonstrate that these cloths are meant to be worn. The result is a stunning red, white and blue outfit with the NPP's party slogan and symbols on it. This outfit attracts the eye of many visitors. I also wished to avoid displaying the cloth on the walls of my exhibit as pieces of art, instead "bringing them to life" with a stunning blouse and dress suspended in the case.

Under the guidance of Mary Frimpong, a local Ghanaian woman, I included a fashion design catalogue in the exhibit case. Yeo, originally from Cote d'Ivoire, continues to design and tailor popular fashions of West Africa in Vancouver. The styles his clientele carefully choose from these fashion catalogues demonstrate the global flow of fashion, through which African cloth and tailoring techniques travel to and from Africa.

Ashanti Funeral Cloth

The funeral cloth was made to commemorate the death of the Ghanaian Ashanti Chief Otumfuo Opokuware II. The cloth is red and black, typical for a funeral cloth in Ghana. Though this cloth was mass-produced to commemorate the death of the chief, it was not sold in markets. I purchased the cloth from royal women outside Manhyia Palace where the chief resided. These women were responsible for the design and marketing of the cloth.

That factory-printed cloth was chosen to commemorate a beloved chief shows that the cloth is valued and that it fits into cultural and spiritual practices of mourning. The symbols which were factory-printed onto the cloth are sacred *adinkra* symbols. The most popular of the *adinkra* symbols is found on this cloth, the *gye name* symbol, which means "Except for God, I fear none". The red funeral cloth is displayed in the case beside a hand-stamped *adinkra* cloth. What I wish to communicate is how sacred symbols such as *adinkra* ones are transferred onto factory-printed cloths which are then used for highly spiritual occasions in Ghana; funerals. The transference of these symbols onto factory-printed cloth and their mass-production promote and ensure the passing on of the social tradition of using and valuing *adinkra*.

Image Factories: African Cloth about Culture and Politics

Factory-printed cloth may be used by museum curators to enter into discussions of value, authenticity, culture, and politics through the labels and visual interplay of the cloth and related surroundings. I will conclude with a look at another exhibit titled *Image Factories: African Cloth about Culture and Politics*, curated by Max Allen, in the summer of 2004 at the Textile Museum of Canada.

Allen also used factory-printed cloth to engage visitors in questions of authenticity. The first paragraph of his opening curatorial statement reads:

When somebody says “African Art,” you probably think of antique tribal masks and sculptures – the kind you’d expect to see in a museum. Here you’ll see something else, African art that is vibrant and modern.

From the beginning the visitor is reminded that this exhibit is about modern Africa. Music was played in two of the galleries in the exhibit. A visitor left a comment in the visitor’s book; “No African Music? I found the ‘other’ music to be a disrespectful note.” All the music in *Image Factories* was popular African Music. As someone may have an idealized version of African art or textiles, which Allen claimed would not be seen in this exhibit – perhaps the visitor was expecting tribal drumming and chanting as the authentic form of African music.

Image Factories gave visitors an opportunity to learn about a wide range of events, cultural beliefs and historical figures through cloth. The exhibit consisted of over 60 pieces of cloth from 16 African countries and was indeed ‘eye-popping’ as Allen assured visitors it would be in his catalogue. The chance to collaborate with Allen on *Image Factories* this year reinforced my opinion that factory-printed cloth has powerful visual communicative value in museum settings. For example, the “family planning” *kanga* showed museum visitors the elaborate methods with which health organizations in Kenya communicated family planning strategies (see Figure 2).²³ Sperm and eggs swim in the background of the pattern on this cloth. Intrauterine devices and birth control pills line the borders and the stages of the moon, denoting a woman’s cycle, are in each corner. To the left and right of the centre section of the cloth are condoms. And in the corners of the centre section are fruit and vegetables, chicken and livestock. In the centre of the cloth is a family of five, standing, holding hands inside a hut. The family is outlined by a blazing sun and they are wearing Western clothes. Two children hold books and all of the family wears shoes. Of course, the message is that if you plan your family, you as parents will have better opportunities, your children will go to school and you will wear Western clothes including shoes.

“Sweetness has no comparison” is what another *kanga* read in the Kiswahili language, with the words PEPSI-COLA written in the borders. The Pepsi-Cola logo is positioned in the corners of the cloth. This cloth is evidence of the existence of corporations which infiltrated the African market.

Besides the excellent collection of *kangas* on display, there were many colourful factory-prints mostly of West African origin. A very special cloth named “Unity is Strength” depicts a lone tree that is breaking, surrounded by a grove of trees and a Ghanaian proverb, DUA KUR GYE ENUM A OBA – “One tree cannot stand alone” or another way of saying it could be “united we stand, divided we fall.” Besides the proverbial cloths seen in the exhibit there were many other patterned cloths which usually have intrinsic meanings attached to them by market women. Many other factory-printed cloths displayed were commemorative in nature and depicted political leaders of various African countries and important events. Visitors attending the show could see the Pope, Nelson Mandela and Jesus, among others, present on certain pieces of cloth.

²³ *Kangas* are worn by women as wraparound skirts and communicate various messages intended for their East African clientele.

Both *Wearing Politics*, *Fashioning Commemoration* and *Image Factories* surprised visitors with vibrant modern cloth of Africa. *Wearing Politics*, *Fashioning Commemoration* showed how a country conducts political elections and uses factory-printed cloth as part of the process, connecting fashion to politics. Also shown was how the cloth is used to welcome guests, such as Clinton, to West Africa. How the cloth is used on spiritual occasions such as a funeral for an Ashanti leader was also demonstrated. Visitors to *Image Factories* could learn about contemporary African current events as well as past historical ones. Most importantly one could learn a vast amount of details about African History with cloth acting as the history book.

Factory-printed cloth has different levels of usage. Producers may not foresee the various meanings the cloth may acquire once it leaves the factory. Consumers and users apply their own meanings according to market trends and use the cloth to communicate within their own societies, while also viewing the cloth as an investment. Curators may use the cloth in museum settings to enter into discussions of authenticity, fashion and politics, while educating visitors about current affairs in Africa. To me, these cloths appear to be an effective way to record or comment on history. Sometimes where illiteracy is common, and where television and radios are not present in everyone's homes, the cloths serve as an easily accessible method of communication, when worn as clothing in Africa. When displayed in museums abroad the cloth is rich in interpretative potential and may be used to communicate a variety of messages to the public.