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WHAT'S IN A NAME: THE DOMESTICATION OF FACTORY PRODUCED WAX TEXTILES IN COTE D'IVOIRE

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INTRODUCTION

In a frequently evoked passage from "Romeo and Juliet" William Shakespeare asks: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (2.1.85-86). Yet, as Romeo and Juliet tragically come to learn human beings make much of names. Indeed, one's name is a significant part of one's social persona; it can describe who we are, it can join us and separate us from others, and it can link us to the past. In a sense, when we are named we are given an identity. Describing the complexities of naming for the Wamakua of Tanzania J.A.R. Wembah-Rashid states, "When the newborn passes the midwife's scrutiny, it is declared human, a baby. This is when it is given its first name ..." (1993: 202). Similarly, for those of the christian faith christening -- that is the giving of a name -- at baptism, is part of the ritual of acceptance into the church. For the Wamakua as for christians and many others the act of naming signifies that a person has been welcomed in, becoming part of a family, a community, a society.

In Côte d'Ivoire names inspired by daily life, popular wisdom, and contemporary events are given to the motifs of factory printed batik textiles, commonly referred to as "wax." This practice is rooted in the treatment of other kinds of luxury textiles in the region. Asante and Ewe artists in Ghana; Baule, Dyula, and Senufo artists in Côte d'Ivoire; and Bamana artists in Mali are among the weavers and dyers who have a long history of referring by name to the individual motifs and overall patterns of the cloth they produce.¹ In this paper I will discuss the importance of naming in the context of wax textiles in Côte d'Ivoire. I will demonstrate that the naming of motifs constitutes a strategy for making mass produced cloth meaningful, especially to women, by giving it broad-based cultural relevance. Further, I will show how names are employed in linking new designs with those designs considered classics, authenticating the new designs through historical precedence.

Unlike handmade textiles, which most commonly are named by the maker, the names given to factory printed textiles by designers or manufacturers are not kept by the public. When a wax motif leaves the factory it is meaningless, an unknown commodity without identity. In the marketplace new names are coined for motifs by wholesalers, merchants, and consumers. These popular names are disseminated by word of mouth and are subject to acceptance or rejection by women, the principal purchasers of factory printed wax. Indeed, while both men and women may buy, sell, and wear wax textiles Ivoirians state firmly that it is women who desire and covet wax, and women who take an interest in wax names. Wax, they say, is a woman's affair. When asked why wax textiles are given names, Ivoirians respond that names make wax sell. However, there is more to the significance

¹ See for instance Aherne 1993; Boser-Sarivaxévanis 1969; Imperato and Shamir 1970; Rattray 1927; Lamb 1975; Polakoff 1982; Posnansky 1988.

of names than this statement would imply. In their article on Kalabari cut-thread and pulled-thread cloth Erekosima and Eicher point out that naming is one way in which imported textiles can be assimilated into a culture (1981: 51). The same is true for factory produced textiles whether manufactured in-country or imported from abroad. When a motif is named and that name is accepted by a majority of women the motif is given significance. A named motif is one which has been embraced, one which has been domesticated. Like the naming of people, the acceptance by women of a popularly derived wax name indicates that a motif has attained social status.

WHAT IS WAX?

Produced using a technique first developed in Holland, factory printed wax textiles have been manufactured since the mid-nineteenth century.² In the wax process a thin resin or wax resist is rolled by machine in a repeating pattern onto cotton yardage. When the resin is dry the cotton is crinkled, leaving thin cracks in the resist. The cloth is then dyed, coloring the areas free of resin. As the dye seeps through the cracks in the resin thin veins of color, known as "crackling," appear on the textile. Subsequent colors are applied by hand using felt-padded wood blocks. This results in the overlapping and misalignment of color areas. Blocking increases the price of wax because it is both time and labor intensive. Since wax prints were first introduced to West Africa, carefully controlled crackling and irregular blocking have been qualities vital to the aesthetic appeal of wax and inseparable from its perception as a valuable commodity.

Originally conceived for trade in Indonesia, wax prints produced in Holland and England began to be imported into southern Côte d'Ivoire in the 1890s (Kroese, 1976: 47-55). A postcard from southeastern Côte d'Ivoire shows several men wearing wax wrappers.³ The man at center front is identified as Boua Kouassi, a wealthy cocoa plantation owner who became chief of the Indénié Anyi in 1910 (Tauxier, 1932: 18-19). This image, showing him and his entourage with all of the trappings of wealth and status, including woven textiles, gold jewelry, a cane, a felt hat, and leather shoes, attests not only to the presence of wax textiles in Côte d'Ivoire at this time but also to the high regard in which they were held.

Today, factory printed wax textiles are manufactured not only in Holland and England but also in many African countries including Nigeria, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire (Werbelloff, 1987). In 1992 six meters of wax, the amount it takes to make a woman's outfit consisting of chemise, skirt or wrapper, and second wrapper or head tie could cost from between \$30.00 and \$80.00 US dollars. With the devaluation of the franc CFA early in 1994 the price no doubt has risen substantially.

² The wax technique was invented by the Belgium firm Prévinaire and Company which amalgamated into the Dutch N.V. Haarlemsche Katoen-Maartschappij in 1857 (Kroese 1976: 16-17). Pedler mistakenly attributes the development of the wax print process to N.V. Haarlemsche Katoen-Maartschappij in about 1882; despite this, the text is of interest concerning the history of wax textile trade (242).

³ The postcard is published in Bickford 1994 (photograph 1) and can be found in the Photograph Study Collection of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

WAX NAMES

Wax textiles are ubiquitous to the contemporary Ivoirian scene. Worn in cities, towns, and villages, by men and women of all ages and ethnic origins wax textiles are intimately entwined in the daily lives of many people. Likewise, while the influence of Indonesian textiles, as well as textiles from other parts of the world, is still evident in many wax designs, the names given to motifs are drawn from the perceptions and experiences of the Ivoirians who use them. Because naming depends on mass appeal names tend to support the opinions of the majority, expressing what is status quo.

Among the themes which inspire the naming of wax designs are current events and politics. For instance, a motif made up of various sized automobiles on a stylized road is called "The Cars of Alassane Ouattara," named for the former Ivoirian prime minister who instituted a plan to raise money for the government by selling extraneous government vehicles. Another motif, featuring the centralized image of a peacock with spreading tail, is called "Golden Scissors," the name of an award given to a fashion designer who works with wax textiles. Religion and material culture also provide inspiration for cloth names. One design, called "Basilica," illustrates the famous basilica *Notre Dame de la Paix* in Yamoussoukro, Côte d'Ivoire which was consecrated by Pope John-Paul II in 1991. Another design, featuring horse tail fly whisks, is called "Horse Tail." Changing technologies are represented by the names "Computer" and "Fans," a design which illustrates oscillating electric fans. Celebrities who have lent their names to wax motifs include "Madame Aka Anghui," named for the former Ivoirian Minister of Women's Affairs, and "The Necklace of Madame Thérèse," named for the wife of the now deceased President Houphouët-Boigny. Finally, proverbs and popular wisdom provide textile names. Examples are "Eye Sees, Mouth Does Not Speak" which warns against gossip, and "Death Knows No Hour" a cloth frequently worn to funerals.

Moreover, topics of special concern to women frequently are addressed by wax names. Because food production and preparation takes up a large part of the average woman's day the names of important crops such as "Coffee" and "Corn and Groundnuts" commonly are given to motifs, as are the names of dietary staples such as "Grilled Fish" and "Yam Leaves".

Likewise, women spend a good deal of time negotiating relationships with boyfriends or husbands, as well as discussing the relationships of others. Male/female relationships and polygamy are a major cause of concern, entertainment, and often of frustration for women; thus, it is not surprising that wax names centering around these issues are popular. In a study of the impact of factory textile names in the Anyi region of Côte d'Ivoire, Susan Domowitz has pointed out that topics like these are difficult for people to address directly. She suggests that by wearing a named textile a person can state her or his opinion of a given situation with impunity (1992: 84-85). Names which address interpersonal relationships include: "I Can Run Faster than my Rival" which refers to the competition between women, including co-wives, vying for the attention of the same man; "Men are not Grateful;" "If You're not Next to Me, Roll Back the Ground" which can be translated loosely as "I'll die without you;" and "You Leave, I Leave."

Finally, personal accomplishments or aspirations are expressed in the names of cloth. Among these are: "Capable husband", the motif of which is borrowed from a historic turkish textile design.⁴ In Côte d'Ivoire this pattern is said to cost more than other wax designs as proof of a husband's capacity to earn; "Capable wife;" "I'm Well Placed in my Living Room," loosely meaning "I'm sitting pretty;" and "Children are Better than Money" which I was told might be worn by a woman who has difficulty conceiving children. Names like these, rooted in the every day experiences of the Ivoirian women who popularize them, transform mass produced textiles into objects with specific identities and broad appeal. Because such names can be interpreted in many different ways they often are widely applicable and even personally relevant.

The importance of wax names is underscored by the association of names with lasting value. Chaka Diakité, a wax merchant in the Bouaké market, explained that owning wax is a mark of economic status. Being interested in the names of wax motifs, therefore, is synonymous with having the means to buy wax. Hortense Koudou, an Ivoirian woman of Bete origins made the point even more succinctly. She told me that a wax textile with a name is one with value, and that a woman who wears such a cloth does so literally "...to show wealth".

WAX CLASSICS

Accounts vary as to when the tradition of naming wax textiles became widespread; however, it is evident that many of the well-known and time-honored named motifs date back to the earliest days of wax importation.⁵ These designs, considered classics, are reintroduced to the market on a regular basis. There they compete with the many new wax motifs introduced each year. The design known as "A,B,C,D," featuring children's lettered building blocks, is among the classics which regularly are remarketed. In the postcard already discussed a man wears an early version of the "A,B,C,D" design.⁶ I purchased a more contemporary manifestation of the same motif in 1989.⁷

Because they are associated with an idealized past, classic wax designs such as "A,B,C,D" are especially evocative. They are described by Ivoirians as durable and are seen as extending back through generations, having been worn by mothers and grandmothers. The continual revitalization of classic motifs attests to their ability to stand the test of time. It is understood that classic designs are not susceptible to the whims of the marketplace in the same way that other, more fashion-oriented goods are. Such consistency implies an inherent respectability which is passed on to the cloth's wearer. Women who dress in classic designs are said to be conservative, proper, and traditional. In contrast women who wear the newest unnamed motifs are said to be challenging the status quo.

⁴ Louise Mackie (1973, 1976) discusses this motif which in the literature on Turkish textiles is called "Chintamani" .

⁵ Most research on the naming of factory printed textiles fails to address this issue. Touré simply states, "For a long time, even before [the problem of] inflation, names have been given to pagnes" (1985: 130).

⁶ The man is located to the far right.

⁷ This cloth is illustrated in Bickford 1994 (photograph 2).

As has been discussed, today wax names are perceived by both merchants and consumers as communicating the intrinsic value, in essence the pedigree, of a particular motif. Put more simply, a name indicates a motif's status as a classic. Because a name is seen as connected to a motif's salability, wholesalers and merchants try to name a new motif as quickly as possible. For this reason textiles may go through several unsuccessful names before one name sticks either because the motif or the name itself has caught the attention of consumers. It is by means of their popularity that new designs earn the right to be linked to the older, classic wax textiles, a linkage which is implied through the recognition of a name. Designation as "classic" allows such a design to share in the accumulative prestige of older wax designs, designs which have known generations of use and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

The theme of this symposium and its accompanying publication is "Contact, Crossover, Continuity." In this paper I have played with the notion of crossing over in an attempt to show how objects can be transformed not only when separated physically from their place of origin but also when separated by a distance less easily quantifiable. The importation of factory printed wax textiles from Europe to the west coast of Africa which began early in this century exemplifies the assimilation of objects decontextualized by distance. However, today wax prints are part of a multinational industry, being produced not only in Europe but also in many African countries including Côte d'Ivoire where my research was conducted. Thus, it stands to reason that the continuing need to assimilate these textiles is due not to their physical importation from abroad but rather to the disconnected quality of their production in factories. Because factory printed textiles, no matter whether manufactured in-country or imported, are not being produced on the inside, such textiles must be given significance by other means. Weiner and Schneider have observed that factory textiles illustrate the shift away from production as the locus for meaning. Following upon Marx, they state, "... under capitalism it is consumers and not producers who make commodities into fetishes, and in ways that have nothing to do with their manufacture" (1989: 13). In the case of factory printed textiles in Côte d'Ivoire, the domestication of textile motifs is indicated through the recognition of popularly derived names, names which promote the continuity of ideas rooted in the experience of a majority of wax consumers.

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