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DISCUSSION OF "TEXTILE TRANSFORMATIONS AND CULTURAL CONTINUITIES IN WEST AFRICA"

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I have divided my discussion of these papers into two parts. First, I would like briefly to address each of the papers individually--highlighting what I find to be some of the most important issues raised by each. And second, I would like to put forth two dichotomies--(1) regarding the relationship between the sacred and the profane, and (2) on the relationship between aesthetic value and commercial value--both of which strike me as critical organizing principles that join these four papers into a coherent statement on the relationship of African textiles to capitalist transformations in the modern world system.

Judith Byfield's paper raises a number of interesting issues regarding the transition from natural to synthetic indigo dyes in Yoruba society during the first few decades of this century. She introduces the problem with a quotation from a 1981 book on African Textiles and Dyeing Techniques which states: "Regrettably, today . . . synthetic indigo has largely replaced the natural." This deceptively simple statement is packed with assumptions about the authenticity of Africa and African material culture, and evokes, I would argue, a certain sentiment which anthropologist Renato Rosaldo recently referred to as "imperialist nostalgia" -- a colonial longing for the pre-colonial. According to this reasoning, natural indigo is assumed to be better than synthetic indigo because it is closer to nature and therefore untainted by the outside influences of mercantile capitalism and industrial technology.

In a remarkably subtle presentation of historical fact and circumstance, Byfield unpacks the arrogant simplicity inherent in this nostalgic attitude by situating the transition from natural to synthetic indigo within the context of the world economy during the 1920s and 30s, and in terms of the shifting relations of production between indigenous African farmers and textile dyers. Far from being a simple case wherein a "modernist" aesthetic replaced a "primitivist" one, the shift from natural to synthetic indigo was the result of depleted agricultural resources caused by the over-production of other cash crops, and the diminishing buying power of local consumers--or, put slightly differently, the shift from natural to synthetic indigo resulted simultaneously from the harvesting of a crop whose organic properties were becoming less and less blue, and from a slumping consumer class whose financial outlook was growing increasingly blue. Caustic soda and later synthetic dyes provided a less expensive and higher quality alternative which insured the continued livelihood of Yoruba dyers. In this regard, Byfield's analysis offers a model or template for other investigations of African transitions from the natural to the synthetic, or from the local to the imported,

which could be applied not only to shifts in textile manufacture but also to other domains of African material production and consumption.

Kathleen Bickford's paper reminds us in a forceful and elegant way that production of textiles does not end when the cloth is removed from the loom, but that production is an ongoing process that extends well into the "social life" of the fabric. If one assumes, as I do, that the production of material culture is as much responsible for the creation of social meaning as it is for the construction of physical form, then the naming of a cloth is just as much a form of production as the weaving of cloth.

Bickford concludes her paper by referring to the naming of factory-cloth as a form of "domestication." Her word is well-chosen and reminds us of many other domains wherein language and words serve to bring the distant or the remote into the realm of the Self or, more broadly, of culture. How different to all of this, for example, was the naming of the 48 constellations according to mythological figures by Ptolemy in the second century A.D.? Or the binomial system of nomenclature developed by Linnaeus to classify and catalogue the plant and animal kingdoms? Science brings nature under the control of culture by assigning names to the unknown. Naming is a process of appropriation (from the Latin proprius, "to make one's own") which functions to make the unknown knowable through the mediation of language. One is reminded too in this context of the manner in which a child names his doll to make it his own. The name chosen is usually not the one which has been arbitrarily assigned to it by the manufacturer on the box, but is of the child's own choosing--brought into his world through its personal association with something meaningful.

Finally, here too, as in Byfield's paper, we are confronted with a clash between the industrial and the homespun, between the so-called "modern" and the "traditional." Like constellations or the remote genera of nature, factory cloth is perceived by those who buy and wear it as something distant and foreign (even if it's made in factories within the nation-state). Naming cloth adds a dimension of familiarity to the remote, and perhaps even more importantly returns an element of control to those who may otherwise perceive themselves as cogs in impersonal machinery of capitalist production and circulation.

Although Igor Kopytoff's notion of "the cultural biography of things" runs through all four of these papers to some degree, Lisa Aronson addresses this issue most explicitly in her paper on the cultural impact of imported cloth on patterns of textile consumption among the Ijo and the responding effect on textile production among the Akwete. The story she tells is first one of incorporation (that is to say, how the Ijo incorporated imported cloth into the geography of their religious and spiritual landscape) and second it is one of transformation (that is, how the Akwete responded to Ijo demand and reconfigured their aesthetic of production to imitate the patterns of imported fabrics). This story of transformation is particularly interesting (if not perhaps ironic) when viewed in light of my own research on how textile manufacturers in

Europe at the end of the 19th century tried to imitate African textile patterns and motifs. While one community of producers was eagerly trying to assimilate and copy what they perceived to be the styles demanded by their consumers, another community of producers (oceans away) was just as quickly imitating the foreign designs that were attractive to their clientele. The potential results of this dual arrangement are, to say the least, baffling and complex.

Two other points raised by Aronson deserve to be mentioned here. First, in pursuing her analysis of the "cultural biography of things," Aronson presents an excellent case wherein the same textile motif or design can have drastically different meaning depending in which context it is being consumed or interpreted. Describing a type of cloth used by the Ijebu Yoruba, Aronson notes that in its original context the cloth drew its cultural significance from its association with the Oshugbo secret governing institution. When consumed by the Ijo, the cloth bears no association to Oshugbo but rather is valued for its imputed references to the tortoise. Travelling through different cultural spaces, the same symbol may be read in totally contrasting ways.

The second point, which also comes up in Renne and Eicher's paper, has to do with the impact of religious belief on commodity consumption and demand. Imported cloth was woven by the Ijo into the fabric of their spiritual beliefs. "Assigning deities to traded cloth," Aronson states, "was one way in which the Ijo took ownership of the cloths" (p.7). Now Marx, in his writings, was very clear on the logic of capitalist production and its relation to systems of consumption. And, so too, was he clear on his critique of religion and its numbing relationship to regimes of governance and the hegemonic state. But nowhere, to my knowledge, does Marx explore the convergence of these two phenomena. That is to say, nowhere does he consider the impact of religion on mercantile demand. The case of Akwete weaving and Ijo consumption begs the question, however, of how do specific religious beliefs fuel certain capitalist demands? And, how do "sacred" requirements create and sustain markets for particular commodities?

This remarkable nexus of the sacred and the secular brings me to Elisha Renne and Joanne Eicher's paper on masquerades and Indian madras among the Kalabari. What is of particular interest here is the way in which the transformation of cloth is linked to the transformation of man. A metonymic relationship has been drawn by the authors, albeit in a largely implicit manner, between the technical process responsible for the modification of foreign cloth into local cloth, and the cultural process which accounts for the transformation of men into spirits. Although these two types of transformation are very different, their success hinges on precisely the same point. Madras becomes pelete bite and men become pythons because, in both instances, the process of transformation is acknowledged or sanctioned by members of society and their definition of what constitutes such a transformation in the collective unconscious.

A second, equally compelling point, raised by this paper has to do with the association of water and cloth. Although the authors speculate at some length about the

relevance of the triangular pattern and the symbology of the python, more in my opinion could have been made of the possible association between a cloth which comes from afar (i.e., from across the water) and a spirit associated with the water. The final performance of the "Owu-arosun" in which the masqueraders remove their headdresses and enter the water is highly suggestive of such an association. The cloth which, as it were, emerged from the water now remains on the land, while the men, who emerged from the land, now submerge themselves into the water. The masquerade thus ends with a sense of balance having been restored between land and water, between Self and Other.

Let me conclude quickly with two general observations. First, in different ways, these four papers make interesting statements about the relationship between the realms of the sacred and the profane. Aronson's paper in particular opens a remarkable avenue of investigation wherein specific ritual demands appear to fuel certain forms of commodity exchange. How do the realms of the sacred and the profane interact in such a situation? What are the processes whereby something as secular as trade cloth can become as religiously charged as the costume for a spirit masquerade?

The second point is closely linked to the first and has to do with different realms of value used to evaluate and endow meaning to cloth and cloth products. Byfield begins her paper by noting that indigo in Yoruba society has both an "aesthetic" value and a "commercial" value. The implication, of course, is that indigo was treasured both for its "beauty" and for its power to suggest wealth and economic success. Later in the paper she notes that "th[e] connection between indigo and wealth was reflected in religious practice" (p.4). Here the suggestion is that the commercial value of indigo was associated with its spiritual value, and that both realms of value informed one another.

Thus the realms of aesthetics, economics, and spirits are inextricably intertwined in the "social life" of cloth in Africa, and analysis of such cloth cannot be adequately carried out unless equal weight is given to each of these three spheres of value. These papers explore the transformation and continuity of African textiles by throwing light from all directions on these different spheres of value and, in so doing, highlight the permeable and sometimes impermeable boundaries of their intersection. In that sense, these papers lay important groundwork and models for future research.