

## Viewing Africa through Clothing: Research and Collaboration

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As I write this brief description of my past year's research, I am in Oxford (UK) to participate in a conference called *Fashion: Exploring Critical Issues*. The conference attendees represent countries throughout Europe, Asia, the Americas, and elsewhere. This is an unusual conference for me, because I am accustomed to being the only person at such gatherings who studies Africa; an interesting if sometimes lonely position! This time, a second paper on Africa appeared among the seventy-five at the conference, presented by a professor of textile design from Nigeria. Our two papers stand out because they are focused on clothing histories and innovations outside the orbit of Western fashion. My presentation on the role of historical and contemporary dress in the expression of African identities opened a completely new field for most of the participants; most experts in fashion studies know nothing of Africa's vibrant fashion scenes. The response to my paper was both

gratifying and frustrating, as audience members expressed appreciation for the work of the designers, and amazement at this vibrant artistic production that takes place without recognition from the mainstream international fashion press and scholars of fashion. Such conferences convince me that this work makes an important contribution to several fields, including African Studies, art history, and fashion studies.

In the past year, I have continued to conduct research and publish on several aspects of Africa's presence in global fashion markets. I traveled to Senegal and Mali in summer 2010, where I interviewed numerous designers and continued my exploration of the markets for fashion in West Africa. During the same trip, I presented a paper at a symposium on the changing images of Africa in India and France, from the colonial era to the present. That event was held at the Université de Cergy-Pontoise, outside Paris. While in Paris, I also attended two Africa-focused fashion shows, one at the Embassy of the Côte d'Ivoire

(a celebration of the 50th anniversary of independence) and the other at a community center in one of the city's chicest districts. Both were extremely well attended—the enthusiasm for Africa's leading designers extends well beyond their countries of origin.

This research was largely funded by the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, where I am guest-curating an exhibition on Africa's roles in global fashion trends. The exhibition will address clothing creativity in Africa through the work of contemporary African designers, innovations in "traditional" dress styles, and the influence of African forms on the Western designers. Through these three elements, the exhibition will use dress to analyze the construction of ideas about African identities both by and for African audiences, and about Africa for European audiences. In addition, two articles from this research were published in the past year, along with a chapter in an edited volume on contemporary African fashion.



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