

Indigenous/International: African Style in Global Fashion

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I was very fortunate to have been awarded a sabbatical for Fall 2011-Spring 2012, in order to complete my second book, *Indigenous/International: African Style in Global Fashion*. I submitted the book manuscript in July, and I am now beginning the initial stages of a new research project. By the time I write my next research report, I hope to be able to describe that new project, and to have a firm publication date for my book on fashion.

My book will, I hope, make an important contribution to the field of African art history, as it is the first sustained analysis of African fashion design, as well as the first academic study of Africa's influence on Western fashion. It may also interest readers from a range of fields with an interest in contemporary Africa, visual culture, and popular culture. Rather than a survey of the continent's fashion designers, *African Style in Global Fashion* uses fashion as the point of entry into an exploration of broad themes, from the uses of forms associated with tradition to construct personal identity, to the production of local expressive forms out of global

networks of images. The book is based on several years of research in Mali, South Africa, Senegal, Ghana, Niger, and France. The designers whose work and careers I address are from these countries, as well as from Tunisia, Comoros, and Nigeria. I also draw from my documentation of fashion shows and other fashion events, archival materials, and analysis of fashion media such as magazines.

Early in my sabbatical year, I completed some elements of the research for my book. I spent a month in Mali during fall 2011, following up with several designers and artists in Bamako who I have interviewed and worked with over the years. I also had the opportunity to bring a new artist into this research, whose work offers a fascinating twist on my study of Malian embroidery (the subject of one chapter of my book). Mama "Harber" Maïga, who is from the northern city Niafunké, has been based in Bamako since 1975. While he creates embroidered garments in a range of popular styles, he also specializes in a very specific, more rarified style that is associated with status and piety in Mali's northern regions, including the famed city of Timbuktu. My research in Timbuktu focused on this work, which is very labor-intensive--a single garment may require several years to complete, made by hand using intricate techniques. M. Maïga creates the same garments using a sewing machine, transforming the process and the style of these large, flowing gowns. Still labor intensive, M. Maïga creates these garments only on commission, yet their lower price makes them accessible to a wider audience. While the hand-embroidered gowns retain their high status, these machine-produced versions offer an opportunity

to consider the interactions between technology, style, and innovation in a centuries-old garment style. This indigenous fashion design, which does not intersect with the global fashion system, along with that of designers who fit the more conventional profile of fashion design, drives my curiosity about the power of innovation in one of Africa's most visible art forms: clothing.

I must also note that I very much hope to continue my research in Mali during the coming year, as I move into a new project. The country is currently struggling to restore order and sovereignty in its northern regions, and several of the artists I have worked with in Timbuktu and Djenné have been forced to leave, uprooting their lives to settle in Bamako. Their circumstances represent just a small window onto the transformation of the country, an astounding turn of events that we all hope will be resolved in coming months.



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