

Connecting Threads

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West African people have used their bodies as canvases to ward off their identities, beliefs and histories for centuries. The social, material and psychological significance of the fabric they wear was directly connected to their social status which was passed down from generations to generations. These textiles have always played an important role in African societies, suggesting wealth, power and prestige. Since the discovery of the earliest fragments of African fabrics by French and Dutch archaeologists, dated between the 11th and 18th centuries in the tombs of the Dogon, dug in the cliffs of Bandiagara (Mali). Designs and fabrics have become an important part of West African culture. The production of these textiles have evolved and expanded as a result of manufacturing through the local and European textile industry. Although Africa has a wide range of textile traditions, wax printing has become a symbol of West African design.

Pagne is the word customarily used to describe clothing in west Africa and it comes from the word "pañó" in the Spanish language which means "piece of cloth". It's a piece of about 1 m wide and 8.5 m long for a standard loincloth. This form is also found in the Indian Sari / Dhoti, the Roman Toga and the ancient form of the Scottish kilt. Before colonization, the Bogolan people would use the bark of palm trees and beat it until it was flattened, then tinted it and shaped it into clothings. West Africa, in particular, has always had the methods of cotton processing, dyeing and weaving. Plants were used to produce shades such as indigo, to make a cloth called Bogolan that is dyed using a process commonly used in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea- well before the importation of modern fabrics from Asia, India or Europe. This style of fabric is still associated, in the secrets of its weaving and printing methods, with mythologies which give it divine origin. Menz Alfa, the author of "D'où Vient le Pagne Voici Son Histoire" article for TogoQueens, provides us a brief description of the culture around the Pagne (African wax print) "It is an authentic African textile culture, manifesting itself long before the arrival of foreigners . In Africa, fabric and clothing are means of cultural expression in towns and villages". According to the times, traditions and stages of life, the loincloth

is worn by men, women and children. It can be plain, knit, colored, printed, embroidered or decorated in a number of ways. This is an instance of the different forms in which Pagne is part of the history of West Africa.

Pagne was an elegant way of showing wealth in its origins, but with the arrival of foreigners and the industrialization of cotton, it became more visible to various groups. In the eleventh century, the weaving of unbleached cotton bands already occurred in the upper Senegalese area of Toucouleur. As Islam invaded African soil, West Africa permitted itself to be seduced by foreign fabrics, thereby importing vast amounts in exchange for its gold and slaves. At that time, the woven cotton fabric was a prestigious ornament and was reserved for notables and rulers. As a result The kings of Mali have been converted to Islam since the thirteenth century. These first Muslim states will be places of trade between the Arab world and Africa. The textiles were transported by caravans from the shores of the Mediterranean where they connected Western Sudan to the world of European and Arab fabrics. Since these foreign fabrics were not accessible to working class communities, cotton weaving is then the solution sought at the local level to make clothing at affordable prices (Ble, 2012).

The first fabrics of this style were brought back by Ghanaian mercenaries working in Indonesia for the British and the Dutch. The Dutch Haarlem Cotton Company (HKC) introduced African wax print fabric as a means of joining the batik textile trade in Indonesia. They designed a mechanized version of batik, by block printing and copying the designs of Indonesia. However once made, they were not popular with Indonesian buyers because of concerns about their quality. As the Dutch had already successfully traded in the West African markets, they wanted to sell their wax print fabric there. They turned out to be very successful because they were inexpensive and they were seen as status symbols. The creation and weaving of these loincloths gave rise to a real local and external industry, including the colorful loincloths of the Masai and the short and alluring Pagne reserved for intimacy in the west and midwest of the continent. In addition, the Pagne can be used by mothers to rock their babies to sleep by putting the baby on their backs and wrapping the Pagne around their chest and waist while keeping the mother's hands free to do other activities. We see this adaption in today's fashion such as baby pouch sling we see both women and men wearing in western society. The

Pagne is not only useful but it can be seen in more formal settings. In more "formal" cases, rituals, or when it was cold, it was unfolded and draped like a Toga or a Sari, part wrapped around the waist and the free edge thrown back the left shoulder, or even raised over the head. An individual with many Pagnes, will use the Pagnes that are most worn for is everyday activities, such as cleaning, cooking or carrying the baby, and save the good quality Pagnes for special occasions (Afrikhepri Foundation, 2020)

In modern times, women's pagne is cut to form three sections, the bottom, the bodice and the overskirt, shawl or headwrap. The garment has a different value depending on where it is manufactured. Throughout the 19th century, Dutch and English textile manufacturers have improved their processes and companies such as Vlisco and ABC have become the leading brands for the design and printing of wax print fabrics and exports to Africa. The African Bazin, the wax of Dutch manufacture, the Vlisco, the Woodin, Uniwax and the super wax, sells at very high prices. SOBETEX, the wax "made in China" is of lower quality. (Alfa, 2017) People don't actually refer to the names of the manufacturer when purchasing they Pagnes. Instead, people in the Ivory Coast community use terms like hollandais, Java, Bazin, Kita. The Ivorian market provides a wide range of wax Pagne. Women, at a brief glance, will identify the different qualities of the pagne: Dutch wax, Vlisco, etc.

The varieties of pagne are not limited only to colors and patterns, but also to the quality of the print and the message it represents. For example, "Z'yeux voy, bouche ne parle pas" (Eyes see, mouth don't speak) publicizes those founding ideals of African culture, such as modesty, intelligence and patience. This Pagne does not favor the indiscretion or alienation of truths, but rather invites wisdom before acting. In this way, it emphasizes the value of savoir-vivre in society, because the community will undergo dysfunctions by the spark of an unthinking word (Ble, 2012). According to an interview I conducted with my aunt about the culture of Pagne in the Ivory Coast and it's different tribes, I found out that: the old print, whether Baoulé, Kita, Senoufo or more traditional Gouro and Yacouba, continues to dress the men and women of Ivorian society in times of joy, unhappiness or mourning. It is true that modern printed cloths invade the textile market, but handcrafted cloths continue to be adornments of great social value, present in all traditional ceremonies. The cloth, known as Kenté between the Ashanti of Ghana

and Kita between the Ewe of Togo and Benin or the Akans of Côte d'Ivoire, is a form of weaving very widespread in West Africa, introduced by the Akan people present in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, originally worn by Akan notables on special occasions. Made of knit and assembled bands of cotton and silk yarn, forming a dense cloth of abstract designs and vivid and luminous colours, the kita is unique because its patterns are woven into the weft. It's quite an art to wear the Kita: the shapes must appear neatly arranged, the edge of the cloth must be arranged constantly. Traditionally, men wear it like a Toga, with a very intricate pleat, with the left hand folded in front of the chest. Women can cover the Kita in this manner, but they can also drape it around the neck or under the arms, leaving the shoulders uncovered. Kita is mostly worn for grand weddings, engagement, baptism and burial. When someone dies, the body is wrapped in the Kita to express gratitude for the deceased. The relatives of the deceased congregate together to settle on the pagne they would choose to wear to commemorate the deceased. Typically, the colors used are black and deep red to denote death (Laouba, 2020).

Even today, the Ivory Coast economic capital of Abidjan is a hub for traditional creations and cosmopolitan fashion. African prints fashion still begin with cloth, and woman and men choose the pagne they want and go to a trusted seamstress or tailor to make entire outfit out of their Pagne. Young designers are using African print to create modern wear such as bummer jackets, ties, blouses, pants, shorts, swimwears, skirts, caps, belts, shoes, bags etc. Contemporary ready to wear (pret-a-porter) is a trending alternative to traditional tailoring. Black pride has opened up African art and aesthetics such as black hair mouvement around the African diaspora which in recent years embraced natural hair style and head covering with African print and jewelry over old European beauty standards. These fashions have influenced a lot of statements around the globe from fashion shows, runaways, to blockbusters Marvels movie such as *Black Panther* to Beyonce *Black Is King* movie with an entire crew of African designers. The Cut article on Beyonce's designer team talk about the shell pieces seen in the film, are the work of Lafalaise Dion, influenced by African spirituality and the origins of the cowry shell. "It's time for us Black Africans to reconcile with our heritage and reclaim our culture; our spirituality, our gods and embrace it," says Dion in a bio. "Our history, we

have to write it for ourselves. Therefore through my creations, I write mine, that of my people." Because of the traditional aspect it represents, the sense of African pride in traditions and rituals, the Pagne became a meaningful piece of culture for black people around the world (Nguyen, 2020)

African print fabric has become a part of pop-culture around the world. These ideas of belonging to a place and a culture are values that have become particularly common in the African diaspora. It is important to mention that being proud of where they are from of their roots and heritage is what it's all about. Subtly merging urban and streetwear worlds with the African print world is a way of celebrating their tribal connection. The Africans of today's Diaspora are experiencing a true return to their roots, out of a consequential desire for validation—of their cultural heritage. A desire to know and understand more about it and, more specifically, to claim its legitimacy and significance to the world. It is meaningful because of the beautiful past and cultural depth behind it helps express the notion of a much broader, more nuanced and multi-faceted generational phenomena. This generation has its own history linked to immigration and slavery and its African origins, a generation that is open to the world and is proud of its dual culture. A Generation that has established its own companies, brands, media and blogs to affirm what has not been validated until now. A generation that wants to participate, in its own way, to a rebirth of the way the world views Africa.

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