



Not African Enough: Fashioning Africaness and Documenting the Frivolous

By Sunny Dolat



Governmental policies in Africa have laboured towards elevating their countries from poverty, ignorance and disease, legacies of colonial rule. This value system is based on needing the industrial revolution to come of age as it did in the rest of the world, creating employment and wealth for citizens on the national scale. Severe resource limits curtail easy achievement of this aim, preventing even delivery of essential public goods like water, sanitation, literacy or security.

Due to macroeconomic opportunity cost, conversations about culture, aesthetics, beauty and particularly fashion are left behind as luxuries in favour of basic amenities and universal development goals. Any data collected and research done is mostly in a small cluster of prioritized fields, with very little in the areas of arts and culture. Investment in the development of cultural knowledge is unfortunate to remain on the outer margins of the Continent's priorities.

It is essential to remember that the colonial enterprise succeeded in devaluing native cultural presence and knowledge in order to assert full dominion. As such, indigenous aesthetics and beauty were not considered serious or important in the face of any continental plan for overall advancement.

Gathering, presentation and analysis of information about and around these subjects, and

presentation of the same, continues to be viewed as frivolous. Research into these ephemera is left to those who can spare the time, intellectual labour and resources. These often tend to be Western researchers familiar with structures for archiving characteristics and evolutions of their own cultures. Western knowledges continue to be analysed with patriotic fervour and full cognisance of historical worthiness and future aspirations. These archives retain a dynamism and emotional connection with their curators, keepers and publics, characterised by open and often re-animated exhibition, and endless possibilities for re-imagination.

In search of Africanness

When research is done on African cultures, however, the weights of old histories and power dynamics continue to play a significant role, whether consciously or unconsciously. These philosophies place African bodies lowest on a hierarchy of disadvantage, meaning that the lens of a Western researcher into African cultures is often that of a curious onlooker fascinated by the exotic. This viewpoint also leans heavily towards the perception of the pristine African, undamaged by Western interaction, perhaps in a bid to cover the violence of colonial reality. When information on contemporary aesthetic practices or cultural products is collected, it is mainly for niche media archives, or to fit neatly into the subset of 'world art'. These particular subsectors find themselves separated from mainstream art history and the classifications that centre Western artistic practice. The definition of what differentiates African Art from antiquity, with attendant declaration of value, is often the province of Western curators, dealers, gallerists, collectors and auctioneers. The Western academy polished numerous perspectives as professional outsiders and gradually became the definitive voice on African art, gaining increasing access to institutions that stored indigenous African knowledges. These archives of artefacts and information were collected for examination, classification and preservation by others, adding to a vast compendium of knowledge to be referenced, often without a right of reply or even invitation to dialogue.

For a long time in the eyes of the world, the idea of Africaness has remained static. The focus on heritage as defining for this geography has overshadowed wider shifts into a globalised, more equal understanding of Africaness. It was essential to present Africans primarily in this revisionist way, so that the moral complexities of how particular elements of contemporary modernity reached African shores could continue to be avoided. Honest explorations into culture cannot evade these holistic reflections, but hyperconcentrated jaunts into antiquity and technicalities can. Regardless of focus, the net result remains that more people from the West publish and own far more functional knowledge about African cultural aesthetics—whether historical or modern—than indigenous Africans do.

The Western researcher and curator cannot be painted as the solitary villain here, though: this story is much more complex and layered. Modern iterations of the Western gaze are continuations of centuries of anthropologist-explorer histories, of people excited to discover new things, who took on the exclusive ability to name these into existence, and who eventually developed a widening catalogue similar to those developed by other civilisations. The problems began when one voice generated the power to establish and maintain itself as the sole objective standard, and made countless political and other decisions to eliminate other voices and frames.

In a changing world, where conversations in the post-colonial space among Africans on the Continent and people of African descent in the diaspora are gaining traction and value, difficult questions are being asked about the place and authority of the universal white gaze. Ethical demands also arise to counter the hoarding of African artefacts and knowledge by Western museums, libraries and galleries, which aside from being archives and centres for education have served as temples to Hegelian ideologies on race and blackness.

Is it possible to have African worldviews when wide swathes of African history are locked away, displayed and contextualised by others? By positioning itself at the top of the ivory tower, has the Western worldview also held itself captive?

What has it failed to hear and see? As Africans embrace the discomfort of a re-emerging self-esteem, new generations of Africans are taking back the ability to name, prioritise and create African spaces beyond developmental lack and industrial aspiration. These generations must assume the power to describe and analyse their worlds relative to their own diverse points of view. Fashion, art and culture are far from the only windows through which African reimaginings and reclamations can take place, but they are a more than worthy arena for essential debates to begin.

Identifiers of Kenyan Identity

There are important conversations between the different tribes and language groups of Kenya that have not been had – conversations about deep post-colonial injustices and inequalities generated and sustained to favour a few select tribes above others, and to locate power with some ethnic groups and not others.

Definite resource advantage accrues in coming from one tribe as opposed to another in this country. Competition for these resources instrumentalises these primary identities. This creates tensions that explode into episodes of physical violence, often catalysed by the electoral process. However, all the conversations about seeking justice have been located exclusively in the political space.

There remains, understandably, a deep and unresolved internal conflict of belongings: between being part of the nation of many and belonging to the community with whom one shares a language and an ethnic origin. A growing number of people prefer to embrace tribeless-ness, and with that, a full release from the problematics of ethnic labeling. Others locate their own tribe as their community of first loyalty, willing to erase others if it means they can reclaim what they view as theirs. Resource advantage links to direct survival ideology and even the possibilities for building wealth, and political and socio-cultural performances of tribe become increasingly valuable in this regard. This is upheld by the convenient narrative of monolith tribal purity, treating tribal origin as immutable even though different ethnic groups have influenced each other via intermarriage and other ways for centuries, over and above the effects of globalization on all Kenyans.

Despite commonly patrilineal naming customs, it is becoming more common to honour multiple heritages symbolically with names from these different groups, creating new groups of people who have multiple and compound ethnic identities. This makes the whole conversation around tribe even more complex. It has been easier for Kenya to claim international languages for her own national expression than have difficult debates around communication in ethnic strongholds and beyond: English, the language of the former British Commonwealth, and Kiswahili, a hybrid of Bantu and Arabic languages spoken widely over the East and Central African region. There are thus legal instruments to avoid directly nationalising tribal performance, but none to counter its unmappable, often toxic, sometimes violent spread into the lived experiences of Kenyans.

When any time is given to exploring indigenous Kenyan dress-practice, it is often as a moral trip into the civics of conscience, to arm-twist citizens into a surface appreciation of diverse ethnic origins in a bid to engender peace despite the screaming inequalities that remain undiscussed.

Kenyans prefer to deal with equalising cultural costumes on stage to feed a benign fantasy of surface nationhood, over delving into the process of national justice, reparations and reconciliation, perhaps because expressed cultural belonging has caused so many wounds for so long. Can it truly matter to Kenyans what tribes A, B, C or D wore centuries ago, if the knowledge of this answers no

contemporary questions? In this case, tribal dress practices are used as political instruments, regardless of their potential as symbols of new national narratives. The state-endorsed and published 2009 National Policy on Culture and Heritage* (“Article 2.1.2: Kenya National Dress, and Article 2.1.3: Design, from Chapter 2 - Culture and Heritage, National Policy on Culture and Heritage, 2009, Kenya.) painstakingly points out the government’s duty in creating an enabling environment for inclusive cultural expression, and investment in development and protection of tangible and intangible aspects of Kenyan culture.

It clearly maps out the state’s role in defining Kenyan national identity with regard to a national dress (even though the document is curiously silent on the 2004 national multi-stakeholder effort to evolve the same, despite the fact that the state openly encouraged and applauded it at the time). It also notes the importance of exploring diverse national identities in the field of general design, specifically mentioning dress as one of the pertinent arenas. This document, alongside several other international documents referencing culture that the government has ratified, is an important part of Kenyan landscape that forced to remain functionally inert by lack of political will to implement it.

Beyond its creation of room for potential legislative intention in an indeterminate future, little can be said about the effect of its existence on Kenyan cultural theory and practice. Individual tribes may derive power in identifying what makes them unique to strengthen negotiations for dignity and selfhood. However, many of the costumes showcased as the sole bearers of heritage are often those of influence and prestige: kings, warriors, elders and the like. There is, indeed, a manner of healing and restoration in the nostalgia of power, and there are also similar leanings in Egyptophilic attitudes towards ancient Africa in significant parts of the black diaspora. Everyone knows how to value the trappings of monarchy and aristocracy. We do not, however, lean towards recognition of the garments and implements of the everyday person, beyond hierarchies of affluence and occupation. Modern day iterations or reconstructions of the clothes that leaders used to wear may be wonderful to behold, but difficult to embody as more than symbolic in the real lives of contemporary people.

An exception to this idea, however, is the way in which Kenyans travelling beyond borders become oddly apolitical by way of wearing pieces exclusively associated with the Maasai tribe as markers of corporate Kenyan identity, whether they associate in any way with Maasai people at home or not. The hypervisibility of the Maasai may have originated from colonial fascination with and significant documentation of their way of life, becoming exclusively associated with Kenya despite a significant Maasai population in Tanzania. The Maasai shield retains a place of honour in the national coat of arms. Citizens, to display Kenyanness, select and wear pieces that speak to them of strength, courage and beauty - layers of intricately wired bead jewellery and leather belts, highly polished hardwood knobkerries, or the ubiquitous, multi-use, multicoloured checked blanket. These are part of the daily lives of the Maasai, communicating the dignity, oneness and belonging that is so elusive elsewhere.

Within contemporary fashion dialogues, Kenya has been anecdotally known as a net consumer of all kinds of cultural content from all over the world, and this cosmopolitan litany of influences—including those from the diversity of ethnicities in our geography—has lent to our artistic practices an eclectic quality that is difficult to pin down or describe holistically under one label. Fashion has not been left behind in this conversation: no one aesthetic has been able to be described as uncompromisingly Kenyan. A description of the term ‘Kenyan fashion’ has therefore not been easy to find, whether from the perspective of the Kenyan designer, the international fashion market, or even the local consumer, who may have different ideas about being and looking Kenyan than they do around the practice of the same.

Not African Enough

Constructions of urban Kenyan contemporary culture continue to take many shapes and forms, with few more interesting than the area of fashion and apparel. The self-rule of the new post-colony engendered an exploration of universal equality – if a Kenyan was able to shop for and buy the same garment as anyone else in the Commonwealth, it was a celebration of the access that had not been available before, and the ability of the newly free young people to define what was then possible for their own lives. A push began to promote and stabilise cotton production in Kenya, though it failed under subsequent political regimes*. (Alila Patrick O. and Atieno, Rosemary, *Agricultural Policy in Kenya: Issues and Processes*, 2006, Institute for Development Studies, Nairobi, Kenya)

This economic failure, which also occurred in other agricultural spheres, was followed by structural adjustment programs by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank looking to open out the previously protected infant industries to free market trade opportunities and global supply chains.

To combat sticky colonial legacies despite these challenges, a desire for more conscious expressions of blackness began taking root in a new generation on the Continent, with people beginning to demand certain levels of 'Africanness' from their clothes to link more strongly with their cultural origins and heritage. With this came the culture and politics of wearing so-called African fabrics, the most ubiquitous of which is Ankara (the origin of the name 'ankara' is unclear, as is when it came into common use).

The origin of wax print in Africa is commentary on the power imbalances within international supply chains. It was created by the Dutch* (* Akinwumi, Tunde M., *The African Print Hoax: Machine-Produced Textiles Jeopardize African Print Authenticity*, 2008, *The Journal of Pan-African Studies*, California, USA) in a failed bid to mass-produce Indonesian batik fabric that was usually handmade, to gain a market by the ability to offer it to consumers cheaply. When an African market was found for the rejected cloth in the 19th century, the original Indonesian designs were replaced by local ideas and motifs, to increase their relevance to their new clientele.

China then joined the industrialization race, manufacturing wax print at cheaper rates and successfully overturning the Dutch monopoly. Regardless of the producer, a critical mass in West Africa had used this fabric almost exclusively for a long time. As hunger and effective market demand grew across the Continent for identifiers of Africanness, wax print was easily taken on in other regions as a pan-African symbol, despite the fact that its symbols and patterns were specifically designed to have special meaning for communities in West African countries. Copying any garment in wax print became the singular textile representation of the Continent, an idea given legs when black diaspora celebrities in the global North gave it visibility and a seal of approval by wearing it proudly. It became easier to design with wax print than anything else, leading to a dearth of actual design—pushing the marriage of colour, cut, theme, drape, texture and fabric in order to explore new volumes and silhouettes.

The true essence of the term 'fashion'—to make—became less valuable. This identity conversation became part of the 'Africa Rising' story, a problematic, composite sub-Saharan identity that has significantly limited many other African possibilities, far beyond fashion and expression. The ankara debates, therefore, are a serious conversation about the politics of origin, assimilation and belonging. The fabric clearly does not pass basic global standards for rules of origin*, (World Trade Organization, *Technical Information on Rules of Origin*, Geneva, Switzerland) to rightfully earn the label 'African', based on the location of the last substantial transformation before it arrived on our shores for our use.

However, does calling it African for centuries actually make it so? Does being its majority users and manipulating it in increasingly innovative ways make it irretrievably ours? Is it odd that fabrics that have been made by others and travelled so far have a belonging to our sense of self that supersedes that of textiles actually woven or fabricated on our shores? It can seem strange that we consider a pattern on a piece of cloth as such a site for cultural contest. For us, this hyper-analysis of ankara is underpinned by the Western looting of the tangible artefacts to which cultural meaning is assigned. Having artefacts taken away during colonialism deeply and irreversibly interrupted our senses of origin and belonging.

Subsequently, Kenyan culture has appropriated the remaining symbols— such as Maasai cultural goods and experiences—to serve the need and desire for both nation-building and belonging. Conversely, the currencies of identity in the North not only include a vast archive of tangibles, but are also anchored in the assumption of wealth and plenty (without questioning their histories of plunder and conquest), as well as the value of cultural intangibles. ‘Frenchness’, for example, is globally associated with luxury, and the magic of the words ‘chic’ or ‘couture’. Scandinavians are known for placing a high premium on futuristic, minimalist design, with Italy remaining famous for giving the richness of their past a place of honour in modern cultural conversation. New African worldviews—around value, culture, significance, and the potential for futures beyond colonial crippling—are essential for Africa to begin to generate and evolve its own autonomous agenda.

This thinking forms, for us, part of that wider aspiration. Within these frames of thought, we aim to dismantle this heavy super-concept ‘African’; the assembly of words, images, sounds, ideas, weaknesses, histories and failings associated with the entire Continent. This is our way to say that we are more than kitenge, khanga, kikoi and ankara. We are not West African—we are East African, Kenyan, particular and individual.

NOT AFRICAN ENOUGH is a derogatory term routinely lobbed at artists, creators and thinkers who step outside the narrow confines of what the world—and Africans—are told it means to dress, talk, think and be like an African. In response therefore, we endeavour to unapologetically contextualize and position black African bodies as beautiful renderings of humanity, in resistance to the pervasive tokenism, exotification and fetishization of blackness in global fashion conversations. We simply assert our right to be more than enough.

Excerpt is a foreword from the book, “Not African Enough”(2017) by the Nest Collective.

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