

***Contemporary African Fashion.* Suzanne Gott and Kristyne Loughran, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. 228 pp.**

Reviewed by Catherine P. Bishop

Inspired by current trends, traditions, and individual experience, *Contemporary African Fashion* highlights the diversity and dynamic nature of fashion and dress in Africa and beyond. The assembled studies build upon and complement previous edited volumes highlighting the critical role of dress and fashion in historical, political, and cultural processes in Africa. *Contemporary African Fashion* is multidisciplinary in scope yet retains a sense of cohesion linked to a foundational basis in ethnographic and historical inquiry centered on processes of individual and collective identity creation. The global breadth of these studies encompasses fashion trends in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, France, Ghana, Italy, Madagascar, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, Togo, the United States, and Zambia. Despite the extensive geographical span covering several regions of Africa and parts of Europe and the United States, in all cases fashion serves as “a platform for the articulation of an Africanity which mines the past and present to produce a future that is in constant dialogue with the past” (Hudita Nura Mustafa, “Intersecting Creativities: Oumou Sy’s Costumes in the Dakar Landscape,” p. 136).

The volume is divided into three sections. The first focuses on fashion within the African continent, the second investigates the world of designers, and the third section explores diaspora fashion. Provocative and colorful illustrations accompany each chapter. Particularly rich and intriguing are the illustrations of dandy fashions in Chapter 10, “*La Sape Exposed! High Fashion among Lower-Class Congolese Youth*” by Didier Gondola. These images reveal the gendered world of dandies and the dynamics of dress as both an individual and collective statement of cultural and political aspirations. In Chapter 13, “*Translating African Textiles in U.S. Fashion Design*,” Leslie Rabine’s unusual and unique collage-based illustrations juxtapose models wearing contemporary African-inspired couture with historical images of well-dressed African women.

Combatting stereotypes reducing contemporary African fashion to mimicry of imported practices of dress, nearly all of the authors emphasize that foreign styles were not simply diffused in Africa as is commonly assumed, but that Africans selected and appropriated materials of foreign origin to consume in locally unique and creative ways. Victoria Rovine explicitly states that Africans adapted and transformed foreign articles of dress according to local cultural tastes and norms, imbuing materials and decorative objects with new layers of meaning (Victoria L. Rovine, “*African Fashion: Design, Identity, History*,” p. 90). Although current processes of globalization offer new possibilities in dress in terms of the materials and sources of inspiration available to African men and women, Heather M. Akou adds that the practice of bricolage among Somali women is much older than a post-modern phenomenon (“*Dressing Somali (Some Assembly Required)*,” pp. 212-225). Several authors in *Contemporary African Fashion* reiterate the global significance of African buyers on transnational economic processes, demonstrated through the evolution of the market for European wax-print textile (pp. 3-4, 15-16, 91). Throughout history, African consumption of textiles has shaped market processes, trade routes, technological change, and product design with far-reaching effects in the global textiles

industry, not just in Europe but in India and the United States as well (Eicher and Erekosima 1996; Lutz 2003; Machado 2009).

Three chapters in this volume are based on biographical studies of designers. In many ways, these chapters provide alternative critical perspectives on the meaning of fashion and dress, revealing African experiences of postcoloniality, modernism, and politics. In Janet Goldner's interview with Kandioura Coulibaly, the designer describes his rural childhood in the village of Karengumbe, Mali, providing glimpses of common household practices and everyday forms of creativity ("Using the Past to Sculpt the Costume of the Future: An Interview with Kandioura Coulibaly," pp. 108-110). He recalls the boredom of agricultural work as a child and the need for an activity to fill his spare time while planting cotton for his family's clothing. Coulibaly's insights merge the reality of life, nature, and agriculture in rural Mali with a critique of modernism and European appropriation of African wealth.

Much of the conversation running through *Contemporary African Fashion* emphasizes the importance of globalization in inspiring fashion design and in the formation of cultural networks. However, this insistence on the global reveals the major weakness characterizing this collection. While the volume claims to represent current African fashions at the global scale, fashion trends in Latin America and the Caribbean are completely obscured by the authors' focus on Africa, Europe, and North America. For example, Afro-Brazilian identity is rooted in cultural connections between Africa and Brazil and expressed through the consumption of literature, art, and fashion (Sansone 2000). In addition to the lack of reference to this world region, the studies of continental Africa do not include any former Portuguese colonies. The unique experiences of colonialism and the close political, economic, and cultural ties shaping modernity in Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe are likely to inspire designers and consumers in distinct yet thoroughly African ways.

## References Cited

Eicher, Joanne B. and Tonye V. Erekosima

1996 Indian Textiles in Kalabari Funerals. *Asian Art and Culture* 9(2):68-79.

Lutz, Hazel Ann

2003 Design and Tradition in an India-West Africa Trade Textile: Zari-Embroidered Velvets. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Design, Housing, and Apparel, University of Minnesota.

Machado, Pedro

2009 Cloths of a New Fashion: Indian Ocean Networks of Exchange and Cloth Zones of Contact in Africa and India in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. *In* How India Clothed the World: The World of South Asian Textiles, 1500-1850. Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy, eds. Pp. 53-84. Leiden: Brill.

Sansone, Livio

2000 Os Objetos da Identidade Negra: Consumo, Mercantilização, Globalização e a Criação de Culturas Negras no Brasil. *Mana* 6(1):87-119. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0104-93132000000100004>

*Catherine P. Bishop is a doctoral student in the Departments of Geography and Anthropology at Indiana University. She taught English for the U.S. Peace Corps in Benin and worked as an evaluator and administrator of agricultural development projects in West Africa before beginning her graduate studies. Her thesis "African Occasional Textiles" is based on research in the collections of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures and the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. Her dissertation research focuses on material culture, technology, and development in the African oil palm sector. Her wider interests include political ecology, science and technology studies, cultural landscapes, textiles, and dress.*