

African textiles: Global flow and circulation of material culture and techniques

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the textile industry and its technologies in Africa, to underline its important cultural and economic role. In the first part, I recall the multiple exchanges and hybridizations that occurred historically during colonialism, for example with the spread of waxed fabrics derived from batik, with their legacy in the post-colonial period (J. Picton 1995, W.G. Clarence-Smith 2014). As highlighted in recent debates, these developments raise issues such as cultural appropriation, globalization, the consequences of the circulation of goods and techniques (T.M. Akinwumi 2008). To clarify better the terms of the question, I intend to draw attention not only to the cultural and artistic aspects of textile production, as is typical of fashion historiography, but also to the techniques and practical knowledge underlying the production of these material goods. In fact, it should be considered how the textile product passes through distinct stages of processing, starting from the raw material to the finished product for the consumer, characterized by very different technical and economic characteristics (for example, capital-intensive phases vs. labour-intensive ones).

In this way, the agency of both the local producer and the consumer appears clearer in adapting and domesticating finished or semi-finished goods, which are culturally and materially transformed to adapt to the socio-cultural context, as consumer studies suggest.

In the last part of the paper, I talk about the current situation that has seen the development of many African companies, also in Tanzania, in parallel with the continuing presence of European companies such as the Dutch Vlisco - without forgetting the recovery of used Western clothes (K. Tranberg Hansen 2019) - as well as the growing imports from China (R. Traub-Merz 2006). I will examine the little-known case of relations with Italy, both from the point of view of textile and clothing production, and from the point of view of the recovery of craftsmanship techniques for social and ethical purposes. Finally, I will point out the potential role of similar instances of cooperation in the context of a project funded by the European Union in Italy (Next generation EU), to enhance sustainability and inclusiveness practices in the world of textiles and fashion.