

## **African wax prints: the history of an industry**

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My attraction for African Wax Prints started in my early 20s while living in Paris in the 80s. I just loved their beautiful patterns and intense contrasts of saturated colours. I would search for off tracks African shops to collect some meters of cloths. I remember wondering why they were called "Dutch Wax Prints" when for me they were so obviously African and why were they produced in Holland? It is only later with the work of British Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare and his use of African Wax Prints, that I came to understand aspects of the Wax Prints' ambiguous history. In particular with one of his most-known work "Scramble for Africa" (2003) a theatrical interpretation/installation of the 1884 Berlin Conference in which headless colonial figures dressed in Dutch wax clothing are seating around a table, cutting Africa apart.

A few years ago through my artistic exploration of patterns and colors, African Wax Prints came back into my life as an artistic aesthetic attractor. This is when I started researching their history in more depth and decided to travel to Ghana to develop a project on the language of cloth and processes of hybridization.

African wax prints stand as an intricate example of cultural hybridization. The history of African wax prints is intimately woven with the history of colonialism and capitalism. The technique can be traced back to Indonesia and its hand-made batiks using hot wax designs and several dying processes. Both English and Dutch copied Indonesian batik production technique while colonizing Java and competed to industrialize its production. The Dutch produced their first batch of wax print in 1850 and tried to sell it to Indonesians without success. Some of these batiks find their way to Africa, probably through African soldiers posted by the Dutch to secure their Indonesian territories. Africans loved these batik cloths and this is how they became an enormous market for both Dutch and English companies (mainly Vlisco & ABC).

Since then millions of meters of African Wax Prints have been designed and sold to African countries by western and much later African and Asian, manufactures. These Wax Prints produced in Europe for the African markets became part of the African culture and identity. For more than a century, western designers have been creating collections of Wax Prints, hybridizing cultural influences, creating designs that mix Indonesian and Indian patterns with African patterns, using colors, symbols and iconography belonging to African culture. Hundreds of beautiful and incredibly colorful designs were born from these hybridizations of techniques and multicultural influences. Yet today we question the fact that this creative industry was built on the exploitation of colonized countries, practicing what could be seen as cultural appropriation: the use of cultural traditions, symbols and artifacts for a profit that does not benefit those belonging to that culture in the first place and whose culture has been exploited.

What is amazing about the history of wax prints is how they became an intrinsic part of African culture. The tradition of wearing cloth in Central and West Africa comes back to its early history, long before colonialism. Men and women, would wear long weaved cloths (6 or 12 yards) wrapped around their waist and body for special ceremonies and important life events. Originally reserved to chiefs, cloths progressively became an expression of identity and social status for Africans from these regions. For the "modern" urban Africans of the time, the Wax Prints took the place of the original weaved cloths, lighter and more versatile at a time

that the sewing machine and the art of tailoring was also adopted by Africans, they became an essential part of women's dowry and a symbol of African women's identity. The wax print cloth can be purchased and offered for many occasions, like a symbolic gift received after the birth of a child, a wedding, a funeral, a special ceremony or celebration as well as the expression of "subliminal" messages. For African women Wax Prints are first an expression of beauty, taste and style, and it is also a language to express social status, celebrate life events, and much more through the act of "naming" the prints.

Local success of the African wax print relied on retailing market women who named the prints following African traditions. Weavers always gave a name to their creation. Market women or their clients would give a spontaneous name to a new design. The cloth then becomes a vehicle for the expression of a romantic feeling, a message between wife and husbands, a religious act or a political statement. This symbolic meaning adds value to the cloth. The name of popular prints also changed through time becoming the support of an evolutive expression, allowing the rewriting of new stories. This naming of wax prints could be seen as a cultural re-appropriation.

Market women progressively took control of the distribution of wax prints particularly in the west African coast. The well-known Nana Benz from Togo made their fortune in the distribution and retail of wax prints and became big influencers on the designs. These women become very influential and powerful even politically. In 1957 the market women from Makola market in Accra Ghana actually financed Kwame Nkrumah's political campaign, helping him to win the election and reclaim Ghana's independence.

After reclaiming their independence Africans and the African diaspora have been wearing these wax prints as a symbol of nationalism and African identity. The Wax Prints have become a symbol of Pan-African identity and decolonization to such an extent that Africans themselves believe the prints' designs to be of African origin which is deeply questioning the concept of identity. The wax prints seem to have become a polyvalent hybrid sign of colonialism, African identity, nationalism and globalism.

In the 1960s some wax prints factories opened in Africa financed and controlled by Western or Asian corporation. Today cheaper Chinese copies, produced in China, have taken over a large part of the market, answering the economical limitations of African families, but endangering the African factories who are closing, and leaving only VLISCO in Holland still producing the most expensive and high-quality Wax prints. Another significant challenge is due to the massive influx of second-hand clothing from the global North, despite the local population having shown remarkable capacity for creative reuse, the amount of non-usable waste generates an unmanageable ecological disaster. These factors have severely impacted local production, leading to a decline in the local cotton production and the domestic textile industry while threatening the preservation of indigenous crafts and economic independence.