

"LIFE ('FASHION') GOES ON" ©

Revitalizing Ghana's Grassroots Fashion System with New Digital Media Technologies

SUZANNE GOTT

ABSTRACT: For Ghana's style-conscious women, *life*—in the form of African-print fashion—"goes on" despite three decades of economic decline caused by the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programs, which ended many women's ability to wear and stockpile assets in costly "Holland" wax-print cloth. In the early years of the twenty-first century, Ghana's struggling commission-based grassroots fashion system has been reinvigorated by the advent of affordable Chinese-manufactured African prints and new digitally produced fashion "calendars," displaying a profusion of new exuberant African-print styles.

By the late 1990s, inexpensive fashion calendars featuring the latest African-print styles began to appear on workshop walls of Ghanaian seamstresses and tailors who specialized in women's fashion. The photographic realism achieved by new digital publishing technologies proved especially valuable for conveying the intricate stylistic details and inventive combinations of African prints, solid-color cottons, and lace that express Ghanaian women's African-print fashion aesthetic.

Importantly, the twenty-first-century infusion of energy from the youth-driven boom in "fanciful" African-print *kaba*-and-*slit* styles, seen in 2007 and 2010 fashion calendars, attests to the enduring vitality of African-print fashion. By 2013, youthful African-print "straight dresses" also began appearing in fashion calendars with titles such as *New Generation*, *Living Young and Free*, and *Lady Gaga*, further expanding the innovative scope of grassroots African-print style.

Suzanne Gott (suzanne.gott@ubc.ccoa) is Associate Professor of Art History and Visual Culture in the Creative Studies Department at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan. Her three decades of research into Ghana's African-print fashion system, Asante women's funerary presentations, and Ghanaian glass beadmaking have been informed and inspired by the publications, exhibitions, and generous mentorship of Doran Ross.

KEYWORDS: African print; digital media; fashion calendar; grassroots fashion; youth

I first came to Ghana in late 1989 to spend a doctoral research year investigating Kumasi’s fashion culture and commission-based grassroots fashion system. In this historically cosmopolitan metropolis, women of all ages, except the most elderly, took great care in dressing fashionably and well, not only for formal occasions such as church events and social gatherings, but also for more informal public settings, such as shopping in the central Adum commercial district or open-air Central and Asafo markets.

Although men and women alike valued and continued to wear handcrafted *kente* and *adinkra* textiles for special occasions, fashion, I soon learned, was viewed as a distinctively female concern. Popular terms for “fashion” and “fashionable dressing”—*life* and *life dressing*—originated as fashion-specific abbreviations of “highlife” that reference the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the early twentieth-century African Gold Coast elite and the Ghanaian-European dance band music they enjoyed (Kirk-Greene 2000, 122; Plageman 2013).

The fashionable stylishness associated with Kumasi women finds its most valued expression in the ensemble women call their “national costume”—the three-piece Ghanaian *kaba*-and-*slit* ensemble of African-print cloth, consisting of a sewn blouse (or “*kaba*”); a wrapped or sewn skirt (or “*slit*”) and an unsewn “second cloth,” worn as a second wrapper or stylish headgear, or folded and draped over the shoulder. In Kumasi, as elsewhere in West and Central Africa, the overwhelming majority of African-print fashions are individually commissioned garments produced in the workshops of local seamstresses and tailors.

In 1990, the women of Kumasi were able to invest a significant percentage of their income in costly Dutch and English wax-print cloth, in addition to affordable, good-quality African prints produced in Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, and other West African nations. However, by the late 1990s, due to nationwide economic hardships wrought by the World Bank/International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), the majority of Ghanaian women were no longer able to afford the Dutch wax “Holland” cloth that had been the hallmark of female maturity and respectability for much of the twentieth century. Many women were also unable to afford

less expensive African prints produced in Ghana and neighboring countries (Gott 2009, 169; Konadu-Agyemang 2000). By the late 1990s, affordable, good-quality, secondhand clothing and inexpensive Asian-manufactured garments gained new acceptance throughout Ghana as major sources of fashionable dress.

During the initial years of the twenty-first century, the efforts of enterprising African cloth traders centering on the production of affordable African-print cloth in Asia—especially China—were answering the economic challenges to African-print consumption wrought by SAP policies of retrenchment and trade liberalization. In 2003, for example, the new Chinese cloth on offer in Kumasi was regarded as noticeably inferior to African prints produced by European and African textile companies. However, Chinese manufacturers soon responded by improving the quality and acceptability of their African-print cloth to meet the demands of African consumers. Investigations into the development and success of West Africa's Chinese African-print trade by Nina Sylvanus have revealed the instrumental roles of *Les Nanettes*, Togo's enterprising new generation of cloth traders, in that transformative process (Sylvanus 2016, 121–28).

Today, the overwhelming majority of African prints sold by Kumasi cloth merchants are produced in Asia. Chinese-manufactured African prints, in particular, have succeeded by meeting the widespread need of financially strapped African consumers for more affordable African-print cloth. During the past decade, the Chinese Hitarget brand has achieved general acceptance in Ghana and other West African markets (Gott 2017; Prag 2013; Sylvanus 2017).

During these same challenging decades, the proliferation of digital publishing enterprises, facilitated by the accessibility of new digital media technologies, has transformed Africa's visual landscapes and local fashion cultures (Barber 2018, 130–32; Cristofano 2014; Nwafor 2012, 503). In twenty-first-century Ghana, the advent of affordable “Chinese” African prints and new digitally produced fashion “calendars,” featuring a profusion of exuberant new African-print styles, has reinvigorated the struggling commission-based grassroots fashion system in new and transformative ways (Gott 2017; Langevang and Gough 2012).

For Ghana's style-conscious women, *life*, in the form of African-print fashion, “goes on” (Figure 1). Despite three decades of economic decline, African-print fashion remains the cornerstone of Ghanaian women's fashion culture. However, the value ascribed to African-print cloth and the significance of African-print fashion have changed dramatically since my initial research year in Kumasi.



Figure 1. Fashion 'calendar', *Life Goes On*. Printed and published by S.M.Y., and fashion design by Akua. Purchased at Kumasi Central Market, 2013. Photo by Suzanne Gott, 2021.

Choosing a Style in 1990 and in Present-Day Kumasi

Kumasi seamstresses and tailors operate their businesses throughout the city's commercial districts and residential areas: in Central and Asafo market stalls, on side-streets in the Adum commercial district, in kiosks along busy thoroughfares, and from private homes. Rather than relying on paper patterns, seamstresses and tailors employ the freehand method of garment construction, using only a measuring tape, chalk, and scissors to determine the style and fit of the completed garment (Galvin 1978).

In 1990, prior to the development of fashion calendars, customers might bring a friend's African-print *kaba* blouse and *slit* to be copied, or they might describe a new *kaba*-and-*slit* style worn by a popular TV news commentator. In a similar way, women traders returning from business trips to Côte d'Ivoire or Togo might bring new *kaba*-and-*slit* fashions to be sewn by their own seamstresses. At that time, some seamstresses and tailors also adapted styles pictured in European dress catalogs. However, whether commissioned to reproduce a style from an actual garment or a photograph, the seamstress or tailor would often add their own stylistic touch.

At that time, customers bringing their African-print cloth to a seamstress or tailor might be able to choose from among the latest *kaba*-blouse styles in the form of paper mock-ups sewn from recycled cement bags. Seamstress/designer Selina Sarpong displayed a large selection of paper mock-ups of *kaba*-blouse styles on the walls of her Santasi workshop, U & I Fashion Centre (Figure 2). By examining these styles, a customer could decide on a combination of features, requesting the neckline of one style and the sleeve of another. Every few months, Selina Sarpong would replace outmoded styles with new paper mock-ups of the current *kaba*-blouse fashions. To attract customers to her workshop, she also displayed completed *kaba*-blouse commissions on plywood hangers which had been hand-painted in the form of stylish, beautifully coiffed Ghanaian women by Kumasi sign painter Nana Duah of Old Tafo (Gott 2017, 144–5).

By the late 1990s, new digitally produced fashion calendars featuring an abundance of exuberant new African-print styles began to fill sewing-workshop walls. These calendars featured styles designed by individual seamstresses or tailors, with some collections composed of styles from local chapters, or zones, of the Ghana National Tailors and Dressmakers Association.

In present-day Kumasi, young sidewalk vendors positioned near the entrance to the Central Market do a brisk business selling the latest fashion calendars to eager throngs of seamstresses and apprentices. Street hawkers also market their wares to sewing workshops throughout the city, especially



Figure 2. Workshop display by seamstress/designer Selina Sarpong of cement paper-bag mock-ups of the latest *kaba*-blouse styles, U & I Fashion Centre, Santasi, Kumasi. Photo by Suzanne Gott, 1990.

in locations where seamstresses and tailors are concentrated. Seamstress/designer Doris Boateng had often purchased new fashion calendars for her Atonsu Market workshop from these wide-ranging hawkers (Figure 3).

The Changing Significance of African-Print Cloth and Fashion

Following the introduction of new European-manufactured “African” resin-resist (“wax”) prints and roller-print imitations into Gold Coast markets in the 1890s, women’s special engagement with fashionable stylishness increasingly took the form of wearing African-print *ntoma* (cloth), or *kaba*- and-*slit* ensembles, which gained new status during Ghana’s independence era as women’s “noble national costume” (Beauchamp 1957; Elands 2017).

In 1990, Kumasi women’s preoccupation with accumulating and wearing good-quality African-print cloth—ideally the Dutch-manufactured “wax” print popularly known as “Holland” or “garment”—remained remarkably similar to women’s preoccupation with the storing and fashionable display of “Holland” cloth documented thirty years earlier in Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast by Dutch anthropologists Boelman and Van Holthoon (1973).



Figure 3. Seamstress/designer Doris Boateng with her workshop collection of fashion calendars featuring new African-print *kaba-and-slit* and ‘straight dress’ styles, Atonsu Market, Kumasi. Photo by Suzanne Gott, 2013.

The African-print cloth used to fashion Ghanaian women’s *kaba-and-slit* styles has remained fundamental to the ensemble’s enduring appeal. Historically, Akan women’s cloth and clothing constituted important, widely recognized forms of female wealth. Throughout the twentieth century, Kumasi women’s collections of high quality, unsewn African-print cloth provided a largely inviolable means of securing accumulated wealth for themselves and their children (Gott 2009).

An important feature of women’s three-piece *kaba-and-slit* in the Kumasi of 1990 was the conventional requirement of a “half-piece” (six yards) of African-print cloth for virtually all women, large or small. Given that women were quite knowledgeable about prices for the different grades of imported and locally manufactured African-print cloth, the six-yard *kaba-and-slit* ensemble provided an unequivocal means of displaying the financial worth of a woman’s African-print style as well as the quality of her unsewn African-print cloth collection.

By the late 1990s, however, the long-standing social pressure for Ghanaian women to accumulate and wear expensive Dutch and English wax prints was losing its hold, especially among urban women. For example, Mrs. Felicia

Boadu of Kumasi is no longer saving high-quality Dutch wax-print cloth to pass down to her two adult daughters because they have no interest in their mother’s African-print collection. In recent years, when Mrs. Boadu buys an expensive “Holland” wax-print, she wears it herself.

In place of the long-standing system of safeguarding their assets through maintaining collections of “Holland” wax-print cloth, women now work with microfinance institutions (MFIs) or join informal *susu* savings groups (Dzisi and Obeng 2013, 48). The value of African-print cloth is now primarily in the realm of fashion and the African sense of ownership developed over more than a century of patronage and consumption (Berzock 2017; Picton 1995). For many of today’s fashion-conscious West and Central African women, it is this combination of African-print cloth and fashion design that makes contemporary fashion truly African.

The Development of African-Print Fashion Calendars

In the late 1990s, inexpensive fashion calendars displaying a dozen or more of the latest African-print styles began appearing on the workshop walls of Ghanaian seamstresses—generally considered experts in sewing women’s *kaba*-and-*slit* fashions—and those tailors who specialize in women’s styles. These early examples included a small monthly calendar for the year; however, by 2003 the small calendars were gone, and models posing in the latest African-print styles now filled the frame.

The majority of these early fashion calendars were produced in Lagos, indicating the limited access of Ghanaian start-ups to new digital publishing technologies during this initial period. Early Lagos-produced calendars marketed in Ghana featured African-print styles for both Nigerian and Ghanaian consumers. Several fashion calendars designed in Lagos, such as 1998 and 1999 fashion calendars produced by emerging Accra publisher Justdan Enterprises, are directed toward Ghanaian consumers through the use of Akan text and proverbs. The variety of fashion-calendar design approaches and formats evident in early examples from 1997 to 2000 suggest a time of experimentation. By 2003, the majority of fashion calendars marketed in Ghana were designed and produced in Accra.

Fashion calendars from the 1990s lack the vivid colors and sharp photographic detail that had become standard by 2003, following publishers’ shift to printing on glossy, clay-coated paper stock. This change was transformational in increasing fashion calendars’ visual appeal and their usefulness for Ghanaian seamstresses and tailors. The photographic realism achieved by this development proved especially valuable for conveying the intricate stylistic details and inventive combinations of African prints, solid-color

cottons, and lace that express Ghanaian women's African-print fashion aesthetic (see Cristofano 2014, 317–18).

Looking Forward in African-Print Fashion—"Life Goes On"

One of the most significant developments for Kumasi's African-print fashion system has been the end of women's ability to wear and stockpile assets in costly "Holland" wax-print cloth. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the mainstay of Kumasi women's African-print fashion culture became African prints produced in Asia, especially China. Freed from the economic and social imperatives of investing in "Holland" cloth, Kumasi women instead wear their African-print styles as contemporary expressions of African fashion and heritage.

Importantly, the infusion of energy by the youth-driven boom in "fanciful" African-print *kaba-and-slit* styles, seen in 2007 and 2010 fashion calendars, attests to the enduring vitality of African-print fashion. The stylish African-print "straight dress"—inspired by African runway designers' 2009 and 2010 collections—became increasingly popular, with shorter styles for the youth and longer styles for more mature women (Boateng 2017; Loughran 2017). By 2013, youthful African-print "straight dresses" were featured in calendars with titles such as *New Generation*, *Living Young and Free*, and *Lady Gaga*, further expanding the innovative scope of grassroots African-print style (see Bialostoka 2020, 146–8; De Witte and Meyer 2012, 56–60).

In 1990, during conversations with Kumasi-based friends—all mothers with young daughters—we had mused about what the future would hold for African-print fashion. Would their own daughters still be dressing in African prints as young women of the twenty-first century? Now, we know: thanks to an abundance of affordable Chinese-manufactured African-prints and new digitally produced fashion calendars featuring a myriad of enticing new African-print styles, African-print fashion has not only continued—it thrives.

Suzanne Gott

University of British Columbia, Okanagan

Works Cited

- Barber, Karin. 2018. *A History of African Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beauchamp, P. C. 1957. "A Gay Garb for Ghana." *West Africa* 41 (2081): 209.

- Berzock, Kathleen Bickford. 2017. "African Prints/African Ownership: On Naming, Value, and Classics." In *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, edited by Suzanne Gott, Kristyne S. Loughran, Betsy D. Quick, and Leslie W. Rabine, 70–79. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA.
- Bialostocka, Olga. 2020. "Choosing Heaven: Negotiating Modernity in Diverse Social Orders." Special Issue on African Youth and Globalisation, *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement* 45, no. 3: 121–54.
- Boateng, Boatema. 2017. "Nsaasaawa: Ghanaian Patchwork from the Kitchen to the Catwalk." In *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, edited by Suzanne Gott, Kristyne S. Loughran, Betsy D. Quick, and Leslie W. Rabine, 156–9. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA.
- Boelman, V. J., and F. L. van Holthoorn. 1973. "African Dress in Ghana." *Kroniek Van Afrika* (Leiden) 3: 236–58.
- Cristofano, Mariaclaudia. 2014. "Signwriters in Ghana—from Handmade to Digital." *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture* 8, no. 3: 304–30.
- De Witte, Marleen, and Birgit Meyer. 2012. "African Heritage Design: Entertainment Media and Visual Aesthetics in Ghana." *Civilisations* 61, no. 1: 43–64.
- Dzisi, Smile, and Francis Obeng. 2013. "Microfinance and the Socio-economic Well-being of Women Entrepreneurs in Ghana." *International Journal of Business and Social Research* 3, no. 11: 45–62.
- Elands, Helen. 2017. "Dutch Wax Classics: The Designs Introduced by Ebenezer Brown Fleming circa 1890–1912 and Their Legacy." In *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, edited by Suzanne Gott, Kristyne S. Loughran, Betsy D. Quick, and Leslie W. Rabine, 52–61. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA.
- Galvin, Norine J. 1978. *Clothing Construction by Ghanaian Free-Hand*. Ontario: College of Family and Consumer Studies, University of Guelph.
- Gott, Suzanne. 2009. "Asante *High-timers*, and the Fashionable Display of Women's Wealth in Contemporary Ghana." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body, and Culture* 13, no. 2: 141–76.
- Gott, Suzanne. 2017. "'Life Dressing' in Kumasi: African-Print Style in 'Popular' Fashion." In *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, edited by Suzanne Gott, Kristyne S. Loughran, Betsy D. Quick, and Leslie W. Rabine, 138–55. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA.
- Kirk-Greene, Anthony, ed. 2000. *Gold Coast Diaries: Chronicles of Political Officers in West Africa, 1900–1919*. Compiled by Thora Williamson. London: Radcliffe Press.
- Konadu-Agyemang, Kwadwo. 2000. "The Best of Times and the Worst of Times: Structural Adjustment Programs and Uneven Development in Africa: The Case of Ghana." *Professional Geographer* 52, no. 3: 469–83.
- Langevang, Thilde, and Katherine V. Gough. 2012. "Diverging Pathways: Young Female Employment and Entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa." *The Geographical Journal* 178, no. 2: 242–52.

- Loughran, Kristyne S. 2017. "Voices on the Runway: African Prints and African Fashion Designers." In *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, edited by Suzanne Gott, Kristyne S. Loughran, Betsy D. Quick, and Leslie W. Rabine, 182–97. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA.
- Nwafor, Okechukwu. 2012. "Of Mutuality and Copying: Fashioning *Aso Ebi* through Fashion Magazines in Lagos." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body, and Culture* 16, no. 4: 493–520.
- Picton, John. 1995. "Technology, Tradition, and Lurex: The Art of Textiles in Africa." In *The Art of Textiles in Africa: Technology, Tradition, and Lurex*, edited by John Picton, 8–31. Barbican Art Gallery, London: Lund Humphries Publishers.
- Plageman, Nate. 2013. *Highlife Saturday Night: Popular Music and Social Change in Urban Ghana*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Prag, Ebbe. 2013. "Mama Benz in Trouble: Networks, the State, and Fashion Wars in the Beninese Textile Market." *African Studies Review* 56, no. 3: 101–21.
- Sylvanus, Nina. 2016. *Patterns in Circulation: Cloth, Gender, and Materiality in West Africa*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sylvanus, Nina. 2017. "Real/Fake: Brands, Labels, and China in West Africa." In *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style*, edited by Suzanne Gott, Kristyne S. Loughran, Betsy D. Quick, and Leslie W. Rabine, 106–13. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA.