

# Colors, Fabrics, and Textile: African Fashion Between Inspiration and Identity Affirmation

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## Abstract

Fashion has often been treated in a rather superficial way, and still today it is perceived and considered inferior to other forms of self-expression. An authentic understanding of the role of fashion in defining and shaping individual and collective identities is a first step to give respect and dignity to this field. People want to be seen, heard but also represented, and fashion is taking important steps in the direction of being more inclusive. African designers have appropriated the fashion of their continent, becoming points of reference and inspiration for designers from Italy and beyond; Africa no longer as a recipient of merchandise, but as a source of inspiration in the luxury and fashion industries. Fashion therefore becomes a tool to combat the stereotype associated with Africa as a tribal and ethnic land. The essay will aim to bring cases of designers who find colors, fabrics, and prints as a source of inspiration, and who contribute to a greater awareness of the crucial role played by this continent in communicating its identity.

**Keywords:** Cultural appropriation; fashion; diversity; hybridization; cultures; identity affirmation.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

For centuries, fashion has been treated – in a rather superficial way – as a frivolous matter, in the shade of the so-called “major arts.” Only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fashion did first have the possibility

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1. This preliminary work is based on a speech given at ISI Florence in February 2020 as part of the Institute’s initiatives within the Black History Month.

to exit this world of anonymity, in particular thanks to Charles Frederick Worth, the harbinger of that group of *maîtres et créateurs* who managed to give dignity and respect to this discipline.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this breaking point with the past, still today fashion is considered inferior to other forms of self-expression such as writing or painting; so much so that people often question the legitimacy of its presence within the artistic panorama. An explanation for this is that fashion often happens to be associated with consumerism and mass market, thus overlooking its original, intrinsic value as a means of expression, a way of re-inventing the self. Fashion can serve as a language to communicate how people feel about themselves and their identity

Clothing is one of the three basic necessities of life; by extension, this makes fashion one of the most sought-after industries. This also means that, by default, every human being uses some kind of clothing. However, fashion often seems to be one of the industries currently lacking when it comes to inclusion and diversity, catering only towards a select group of people.<sup>3</sup> People want to be seen, heard, and – most of all – represented. An authentic understanding of what representation truly means, and how it relates to the struggle for inclusion and diversity, is a first, major step that fashion must take to become more inclusive.<sup>4</sup>

African designers have appropriated the fashion of their continent, becoming points of reference and inspiration for Italian designers and beyond. Consequently, Africa is no longer seen as a mere recipient of goods, but a source of inspiration in the luxury and fashion sectors. This shows how fashion can be a tool to combat the stereotype linked to Africa as a tribal and ethnic land, paving the way for a deserved celebration of Africa and the economic importance it is assuming in global scenarios.

Within this context, and from the perspective briefly outlined above,

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2. See F. Fabbri, *La moda contemporanea: arte e stile da Worth agli anni Cinquanta*, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2019, pp. 3-4.

3. [www.3dlook.me/inclusivityinfashion](http://www.3dlook.me/inclusivityinfashion)

4. [www.3dlook.com](http://www.3dlook.com)

my article aims at bringing cases of Florentine stylists who find a source of inspiration in traditional African colors, fabrics, and prints. In doing so, they contribute to a greater awareness of the crucial role played by this continent in communicating its many peoples' identity.

### **Identity and Fashion**

There are several elements to be considered in attitudes to fashion; first the globalization process. Globalization doesn't correspond to westernization. At least, this is no longer the case. Emerging countries, "other countries", are becoming prominent and – as such – pushing for a different kind of globalization through their cultural influence all over the world. The popularity these countries are gaining is due to several economic and, especially, cultural tools. Among emerging countries, we can find African countries; among specific cultural tools, we can find fashion. This new process of globalization (or, we should say, *glocalization*) is an ongoing trend, whereby globalizing effects come from a variety of sources, that is, different countries and different cultures.

Contemporary globalization processes are primarily related to the following phenomena:

New transnational or global cultural patterns, practices and flows, and the idea of 'global culture(s)';

The unprecedented multidirectional movement of peoples around the world involving new patterns of transnational migration, identities, and communities.

These two sets of phenomena (broadly speaking, "cultural" phenomena) have acquired economic meaning; as a result, specific sectors of the market (the global market) have begun to work on them to the point of turning them into specific "assets".

Another feature of the debate around the notion of "identity" tends to take on new perspectives. At the basis aspect of every identity (such as religion, nationality, class, race, culture, and gender) we posit the existence

of a common thread linking all its actors together. Yet, in most cases, this is not true in today's society.<sup>5</sup> As Kwame Anthony Appiah has highlighted in a recent book: "Much of our contemporary thinking about identity is shaped by pictures that are in various ways unhelpful or just plain wrong." In this respect, Appiah points out that "we are living with the legacies of ways of thinking that took their modern shape in the nineteenth century, and that it is high time to subject them to the best thinking of the twenty first."<sup>6</sup>

### **The re-birth of local cultures against a stereotyped interpretation of fashion**

Another aspect that could help us better understand the increasing importance of emerging countries (including African ones) in the contemporary world, is that globalization processes have allowed the re-birth of local cultures. Simply put, local/national identities arise to affirm their role in a world ruled by global players. This means that, thanks to new possibilities offered by the advancement of new communication systems (e.g., the Internet, e-commerce, and social media), national -- once colonized (politically, socially and culturally) -- countries have been able to promote their own local cultures, their own "tastes", their own fashion (in a wider sense) to "the others". These "others" are the very people who had always seen them from a stereotypical perspective. Fashion has thus become a peculiar and distinctive cultural tool to help "export" local and national cultures on a global scale.

For this reason, we should talk about fashion not only as a sector of the globalized market, but also as one of the most powerful cross-cultural tools of communication we can rely on today. Fashion is a tool of self-expression; as such, it can serve to convey personal identities. In the case of African style, which has been adopted and reinterpreted by some Florentine and Italian creative designers, fashion has become

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5. Pozzo B., *Fashion between inspiration and appropriation*, in Laws, February 2020

6. Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2018. *The Lies that Bind. Rethinking Identity. Creed, Country, Colour, Class, Culture*. London: Profile Books.

a cultural tool of representation of collective identities. Also, fashion, has become a strategic tool to hybridize different cultures and different tastes. If we talk about hybridization, it means that fashion can act as a cross-cultural mediator, capable of mixing different tendencies from different cultural identities. So, the process of hybridization of African styles and (European) Italian/Florentine styles correspond to a form of intercultural dialogue. It can be regarded as a metaphorical bridge between Italy and Africa that is characterized by symbols. Symbols are a cultural representation of reality; clothing is a symbolic manifestation of a specific culture. Each culture cultivates its own symbols; for this reason, each culture uses clothing (fashion) as a symbolic tool to express its own identity. Fashion, as a symbol, is thus able to favor human communication and produce better intercultural understanding, since it goes beyond stereotypes (oversimplified and superficial representations of a community, group or nation) and is capable of creating metaphoric “bridges” across cultures. So, we can also say that fashion may help us avoid prejudice and discrimination.

Far from being something intrinsically negative, a stereotype is a set of assumptions which assign specific characteristics and behaviors to a group of people. Stereotypes are thus used by marketers to create commercial messages capable of aligning themselves with society’s cultural norms. Despite its involving outdated and potentially offensive stereotypes, this technique is still widely used in modern advertising.<sup>7</sup> It is not unusual to see campaigns that misrepresent African identity through the typical tribal world in the attempt of increasing consumer awareness towards issues like diversity, inclusion, and race.

This issue is strictly linked to the distinction between cultural appropriation and authenticity, where the appropriation does not mean that it represents a substitute for diversity. Cultural appropriation takes place

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7. M. Eisend, J. Plagemann, J. Sollwedel, *Gender roles and humor in advertising: The occurrence of stereotyping in humorous and nonhumorous advertising and its consequences for advertising effectiveness*, *Journal of Advertising* 43, no. 3, 2014

when members of a majority group adopt cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way. To fully understand its consequences, though, we need to make sure we have a working definition of *culture* itself.<sup>8</sup> The problem is – particularly perceived in the fashion system nowadays – on one hand, is a constant balance between the need of innovation and change intrinsic to fashion, and on the other, inspiration, the tension between commercial reasons, and preservation and respect of local cultures

This creates a kind of free-for-all for ‘design inspiration’ and ‘borrowing’. Contributor Jennifer Ayres defines appropriation as ‘an umbrella term that encapsulates different degrees of borrowing, ranging from inspiration to theft’, thus highlighting the contradictory nature of a term like ‘borrowing’, when ‘returning’ or ‘giving back’ (or even citation/recognition) is never intended. Critiquing ‘inspiration’ and ‘borrowing’ from the past, Ayres encourages readers to question, “what degree of borrowing is ethical in order to claim original design” (Green, Kauser 2017).

The constant desire to innovate with original and effective solutions led Western designers to incorporate other cultures’ distinctive looks, reinterpreted by the designer’s creativity and sensitivity to other cultures. This cannot be considered a novelty, as influences from far away cultures were present in European fashion since the opening of the silk trade, dating back to the fourth century (Geczy 2013). Together with spices, fabrics were among the products provided through the first routes of commerce (Segre Reinach 2006). In this sense, textiles began to travel between countries even before people did, almost in their place, and since ancient times. On the other side, beyond the exchanges and hybridizations, which constitute the essence of the textile product, there are specific traditions that closely reflect the culture in which they were born. For this very reason, textiles have always been a perfect vehicle to establish, express, and maintain people’s cultural identity (Segre Reinach 2006).

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8. [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)

### **Cultural Appropriation in Modern Fashion Systems**

According to Dr. Benedetta Morsiani (research fellow in the department of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Westminster, London), cultural appropriation should be defined as follows:

“The act through which specificities of a given culture, such as symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies, are used by members of a different culture. This phenomenon now mainly refers to the exploitation of marginalized cultures by more dominant, mainstream cultures. [...] The younger generation is more aware and vocal about cultural appropriation due to the cultural diversity in metropolises, and their awareness of the lack of representation for specific groups of people. I believe it is especially this need [to represent the marginalized] that encourages people to want to protect the cultural specificities of their racial and ethnic groups.” (Morsiani, 2017).

“Therefore,” Morsiani concludes, “people become vocal on matters of cultural appropriation as a means of maintaining and protecting their own cultural identity, which is already marginalized”. (Morsiani, 2017).

In the world of fashion, designers have always taken inspiration from other cultures: textiles, patterns, fabrics, and designs. In recent years, higher attention by consumers to the ethical aspects of fashion has led to a reassessment of the appropriation of cultural values and symbols in the fashion marketing strategies. In 1997, for instance, John Galliano (Dior creative director) launched a collection inspired by the Masai people. In 2016 Valentino defined one of his own collections as “Africa Tribale e Selvaggia.” In 1993 Gianfranco Ferrè was inspired by the “African Warriors”, while in 1967 African fashion reached the catwalk thanks to Yves Saint Laurent’s famous Bambara collection. To quote from Young and Haley: “Ideas flow and are reinvented, in fashion as in law as in other fields of human activity, as ‘nothing comes from nowhere’ ” (Young and Haley 2012). All the examples

referenced above show that designers can be inspired by a foreign culture and are able to re-elaborate it in a “new fashion” (Pozzo, 2019). In other cases, the use of religious symbols has often served as a form of cultural appropriation and has been regarded as such.

The debate is also on the risk of producing creations that are a replica of the original, or that, even worse, simply try to mimic African culture, in the attempt of producing “new” hybridized types of clothes and collections. This shows how, when it comes to the fashion industry, the debate on cultural appropriation revolves around very different topics, expressing various kinds of worries. While the use of textiles, images, and patterns from other cultures might be, sometimes, at the basis of some transcultural creativity and lead to appreciation of cultural diversity (Pozzo 2019), it can also be considered inappropriate to cultural or religious symbols to produce fashion. Eventually, this may harm the community where the appropriated items come from (Sharoni 2016). This is exactly the case when religious or cultural symbols of other ethnic groups are borrowed for commercial purposes, disregarding the values they express. Fashion may also become offensive when items reproduce stereotyped representations of culture, race, or gender (Pozzo 2019). Finally, borrowing patterns, motifs, or design features can lead to a violation of cultural heritage with negative economic consequences. As Sharoni remarks, we should always remember that one of the main critiques addressed to cultural appropriation is that it often implies a lack of compensation to the source community for the use of their cultural product (Sharoni 2016).

### **Fashion between innovation, diversity, and creativity**

The contradictions that the fashion system experiences are linked to how designers opened the doors of their fashion houses to cultural exchange and the appropriation of symbols, values, and rituals used by different cultures. Many cases of cultural appropriation had severe consequences on consumers’ perception of brand personality as well as the lack of multicultural approach that often leads to stereotypes and discriminations. For instance, Gucci was accused of racism because of a \$890

black-knit women's balaclava that could be pulled up over the lower half of the wearer's face. The sweater included bright red lips with an opening for the mouth, a detail widely denounced on social media as evoking blackface imagery (Hsu and Paton 2019). This led Gucci to apologize for the offense caused by the balaclava's design. Gucci further released a statement declaring that "We consider diversity to be a fundamental value to be fully upheld, respected, and at the forefront of every decision we make. We are fully committed to increasing diversity throughout our organization and turning this incident into a powerful learning moment for the Gucci team and beyond." Gucci removed the image of the sweater from its e-commerce site and withdrew the item from all of its physical stores. (Hsu and Paton 2019).

Another famous case occurred in 2018, when Dolce & Gabbana made three videos for the Chinese fashion market. Those videos showed a young Asian model having trouble eating Italian food such as pizza, pasta, and cannoli with chopsticks. Playing on a bad double entendre characterized by sexual innuendos in the video featuring cannoli, a male narrator asked the model "is it too big for you?" (Pan 2018). The end result was that Dolce & Gabbana were forced to cancel the fashion show already scheduled in Shanghai, while their products were removed from several Chinese online retailers (Pozzo 2019).

Some selected cases, however, indicate the importance of implementing multicultural approaches in fashion. For instance, fashion designer Gioia Bini was born in 1989 and spent her early years among the nomadic Tuareg in Sub-Saharan Africa. The desert jewels of the Tuareg and the draped Dutch wax patterned cloth worn by women in Africa colored Gioia's earliest experience of dress. Moving from Africa to her new home in Florence, Gioia became a 'child' of this Renaissance capital, retaining her African past while living in the city of Leonardo and Michelangelo. Gioia's creativity is marked by a world of beautiful objects from near and far; they are put side by side so as to highlight both contrasts and affinities. The artists, photographers, models, creatives, and travelers who populate Gioia's surrounding are a stream of style and love of life,

namely, her friends and collaborators, whose lives and stories are shared in the fabrics of the dresses they inspire her to create.

This is just an example showing that designers can present a different image of the African continent; an image characterized by innovation, diversity (as an added value) and creativity. Likewise, it is an image of the African continent projected into the future; by representing its potential, it contributes to a greater awareness of the crucial role that this continent plays, also when it comes to communicating its own, true identity.

A new generation of creatives claim their own identity, presenting collections that compete with the most important European designers. In a sense, one could claim that – in the world of fashion -- the African continent is starting to stand on its own two feet, thus redefining the geographical hierarchy of style. For many years Africa has inspired European designers; now the continent wants to be a partner on the global fashion scene, affirming its own identity. Africa is no longer satisfied with serving as a source of inspiration that often hides lack of multicultural awareness. From “inspired by Africa” to Made in Africa is more than a terminology shift: it indicates the importance of also protecting traditional cultural expressions with a clear attribution of values to the continent, avoiding the exploitation of local traditions often reflected in fabrics, textiles, and designs.

## **Conclusions**

Appropriation is a complex ethical issue in fashion; in today’s fashion industry, taking inspiration from other cultures’ designs has become a norm. Together with an increasing awareness by consumers on ethical issues, the analysis of the above cases indicates the importance of a multicultural approach to fashion; the consequences of ignoring all this are the perpetuation of stereotypes and reputational issues. In a mass-produced world, the affirmation of African fashion also represents the protection of local cultures and traditions against the exploitation of symbols in collections and designs. In many cases where traditional art or knowledge is exploited, the communities derive no economic

benefits; if they do gain something, such benefits often pale in comparison to the huge profits made by the exploiters (Kuruk 1999). Aesthetics, identity, and appropriation reveal the ambiguity of the fashion system, in balance between the search for inspiration and innovation on the one hand and the need to maintain the integrity of local values and cultural authenticity on the other.

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## **About the author**

Francesca Passeri earned her undergraduate degree in Law, her MA in Communication and Media, and her Ph.D. in ICT and Information Society at the University of Florence. Between 1998 and 2006 she worked in the communication & marketing field in publishing, fashion, and tourism industries. Between 2007 and 2011 she taught Communication Marketing and Public Speaking at the MA European Program in Media and Communication, University of Florence. Francesca Passeri is Adjunct Professor at ISI Florence (Intercultural Communication) and she teaches Fashion Communication and Fashion Marketing at other American university programs in Florence. Her study interests focus on: social media marketing; communication and branding strategies in the Italian fashion system; fashion and identity. She is member of the editorial board and author at "Nautilus Rivista"; she is also author of several essays and academic publications.