Link can be found at: http://find.galegroup.com/gtx/infomark.do?contentSet=IAC-Documents&Action=interpret&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&docId=A206866965&prodId=ITOF&digest=24177a5eb3602381895a991511df65d4&source=gale&userGroupName=hunter&version=1.0


Abstract:
This article examines the interface between fashion production and the visual experience associated with urban life in Dakar, Senegal. It focuses on tailors and fashion designers to explore how their relationship to the city informs their creative practices and the processes of making fashion. Both tailors and fashion designers locate their creative practice in Dakar by attributing their engagement with the city's visual and conceptual matrix as fundamental to fashion making. In addressing the interplay between fashion production and the urban environment, this discussion further considers the dynamics of artistic positioning and the complex intersections between local and global inflections. This analysis underscores the imbrication of fashion in Dakar and the city's conceptual and visual landscape, the street and the mass media, and finally dialogues within and beyond Africa. Not only do fashion makers select visual and conceptual elements from the urban ocular field. By creating new propositions for visual consumption, fashion makers also ever-constitute visual experience in Dakar.

Full Text:

Introduction

Important topics of everyday conversation and a substantial expenditure for many Dakarois, fashion and dressing well are central features of expressive, visual culture in Senegal's capital city. From custom-made attire to haute couture design and imported new clothing to second-hand clothing, Dakar's various platforms for fashion production encompass a broad spectrum of individuals and institutions. (1) As with other forms of creative expression, especially beaux arts production and collection, fashion making is a quintessentially urban phenomenon in that the city offers unparalleled creative and human resources (Grabski 2003).

The designers and tailors profiled in this article share a relationship to Dakar's urban space and its visual environment. Specifically, the work of fashion producers in Dakar is predicated on a relationship with the urban environment's visual and conceptual resources. My research in Dakar in 2001 and 2002 examined how fashion producers' location in the city informs their visual production and working methods. By considering the interplay between the work of fashion makers and the many other forms of visual traffic that animate Dakar, this analysis explicates the ways in which the city provides a globally inflected matrix for fashion production. Furthermore, in order to understand the complexity of their roles as fashion makers, this article discusses the resources instrumental to their visual production.

Interviews with two sets of Dakar-based fashion producers provide the foundation for this study. The first group includes tailors working in the neighborhood of Niayes Thioker, especially Maguette Sy and Cheikh Faye of Central Couture, Bira Diouf of Galerie Payenne, and Balla N'diaye, Ndiasse Thiam, and Ami Colle Sene who work independently on Rue Adja Madeline N'gom. (2) The second set of producers, whose work aligns most closely with an international notion of haute couture fashion are designers Claire Kane and Oumou Sy. (3) In addition to her recently opened Paris Boutique in the Forum des Halles, Kane has a downtown Dakar boutique located on Rue Mousse Diop, adjacent to a main thoroughfare. Oumou Sy's studio is located in the heart of the Medina, just off Avenue Blaise Diagne. Although the neighborhoods discussed here are centrally located and contoured by porous boundaries, they epitomize what Pfaff describes as "the social and spatial dualism of African cities (Pfaff 2004: 103)." Medina and Niayes Thioker are crowded, popular neighborhoods with sprawling, seemingly makeshift residential and commercial structures. In contrast, downtown Dakar is recognizable by its relatively imposing colonial architecture as well as administrative and commercial buildings.
Dakar's Spectatorial Realm as Information Environment and Artistic Resource

The assertion that fashion exists within the visual circuitry of the everyday urban environment expands on recent scholarship in visual culture studies. The pioneering work of Mirzoeff, Rogoff, Shohat, and others posits vision and the everyday experience of the visual as analytical frames fundamental to our understanding of image making and meaning (see especially Mirzoeff 1998: 7). My study of designers and tailors in Dakar builds on this foundation by examining how their work relates to their field of vision, the so-called spectatorial realm and the visual culture operating within it (Rogoff 1998: 14-16). Dakar's dynamic and dense visual realm is the primary field in which tailors and designers undertake the act of looking. Both public and private spaces figure into their daily visual experience. Glancing at the pages of a fashion magazine, watching a music video, or surfing the Internet offer fodder for the eye as much as the intense visual traffic of the city's streets. As Mirzoeff theorizes, the abundance of images as well as our ability to absorb and interpret them indicates that human experience is more visually oriented than ever before (Mirzoeff 1999: 1-5). Dakar is no exception, for in this city, visual experience is embedded in daily life to a striking degree (Figure 1).

It is widely recognized that Dakar is a copiously, and often unrelentingly, visual city. This observation holds especially true for downtown Dakar, the Medina, and Niayes Thioker where the fashion makers discussed here work. It is virtually impossible to amble through these neighborhoods without submitting to a flurry of eye-catching encounters. Indeed, ocular overload kicks in soon after setting foot in these neighborhoods. The eye is pulled in every direction--the deteriorating surface of building facades plastered with nightclub flyers and advertisements for upcoming events, graffiti, and occasional wall murals. Vibrantly painted car-rapides combine with yellow taxis and mopeds weaving through city streets. Glass painting displays, makeshift market stalls, and street vendors selling the latest mass-produced shirts from abroad vie for the attention of potential consumers. Many images populating the visual landscape are decidedly local in origin, such as the hand-painted signs advertising dibiteries and the omnipresent iconic portraits of the Mouride Saint Amadou Bamba. Others, including billboards plugging Nescafe, Michelin tires, and Coca-Cola, dot the horizon along the city's main roads, signaling the ubiquitous presence of international commodity culture. With its geographical location on the westernmost point of the African continent and its historical role as a crossroads, Senegal has been for centuries a site for the blending or metissage of ideas from near and far. Much as individuals in cities elsewhere in the world, there is little doubt that Dakar's populace participates in and negotiates the flows of a globally inflected environment for visual experience.

In addition to public spaces such as city streets, the mass media is a salient feature of Dakar's spectatorial realm. Media such as the local RTS (Radio Television Senegal) and satellite television as well as national and international magazines offer significant conduits in "the unceasing flow of images from the swirl of the global village" (Mirzoeff 1998: 4). For instance, the Mexican telenovela, Marimar and Brazilian Sublime Mensonge air weekly, much to the pleasure of their many devotees. Music videos by French and American rap musicians flash across television screens with as much regularity as videos by Senegalese superstar Youssou N'Dour. It is common to see printed matter from abroad in Dakar, especially copies of fashion magazines, Amina and Elle, whose pages offer a barometer of international trends. Indeed, the continuous influx of visual and conceptual propositions from within and beyond Dakar further insures the endless mutability of the city's cosmopolitan environment and visual traffic.

The vibrancy and dynamism of the city streets is dramatically illustrated by the sartorial concerns of its population. Style-conscious individuals elegantly dressed in billowing embroidered boubous or tailor-made ensembles in colorful wax-print cloth walk alongside individuals sporting blue jeans, jogging suits, and Sean Jean shirts. Dressing well adds another potent layer of vitality to ocular experience in Dakar. Tailoring is among the most common neighborhood businesses, and it is no exaggeration to say that a tailor's studio always seems to be just around the corner. In fact, tailor Bira Diouf, former President of the National Tailor's Association, estimated that more than 20,000 tailors practice their trade in Dakar, a city whose population is nearly 2.5 million (Bira Diouf, interview with author, Dakar, July 26, 2001).

The centrality of clothing, dressing well, and aesthetic evaluation to life in Dakar has been well established in an illuminating body of scholarship by Heath, McNee, Mustapha, Rabine, and Scheld. In her research on fashion, socioeconomics, and globalization, Mustapha establishes what she terms the "sartorial ecumene" of the Dakarois (Mustapha 1998: 15). She writes: "The spectacular garments and
arresting individuals that populate Dakar's public spaces illustrate the vital importance of appearance, dress, and beauty there. Not only are the people, and especially the women, strikingly beautiful, but they are fashionable, and pay all the attention to conduct, style and detail that this entails" (Mustapha 1998: 19).

Dakar's spectatorial realm offers fashion producers a matrix of visual and conceptual propositions. Echoing Bourdieu's (10) theorization of "the field of cultural production," urban experience may be conceptualized as a terrain in which visual and conceptual propositions are enmeshed (Bourdieu 1993). (11) In this, fashion making is analogous to the creation of other art forms in that its production, circulation, and consumption are shaped by and linked to the urban environment. As the term matrix suggests, the elements constituting Dakar's spectatorial realm are multiple, intersecting, and of diverse origins. Both visual and conceptual, these propositions entangle with one another in an elaborate and dense circuitry, much as Appadurai discusses in his conceptualization of the "flows" of images and ideas comprising an "ideoscape" (Appadurai 1996: 33-6). Whether global or local, whether deriving from the mass media or public life, the elements constituting visual experience in Dakar intersect as an inclusive and absorbent matrix of propositions.

The tailors and designers I interviewed commonly posited their interaction with the city's matrix of propositions as essential to their production. In this, the urban environment provides a central, defining frame out which their fashion production derives. Visual experience in Dakar and its various propositions provide an information environment and artistic resource for both designers and tailors. Their creative process involves an on-going dialogue with the city's spectatorial realm and its various propositions for fashion making, like other forms of creative expression, "is born between individuals and larger frameworks in a process of dialogic interaction" (Shohat and Stam 1998: 46). As is the case with other visual artists in Dakar, the fashion makers discussed here are catalyzed by the social and visual phenomena in which they live. Far from being passive consumers in their field of vision, fashion makers draw from it selectively and thoughtfully. In particular, they participate in a kind of visual sampling, culling the resources at their disposal. This process entails appropriation and invention, absorption and recombination. This process is described by tailor Bira Diouf, "I develop my designs in relation to the society in which I live and I also try to create even when I am walking in the street. Here I take my ideas and the ideas of others. I put them together and I create something else. That is always what I do, even if I am just looking, I am always working" (Bira Diouf, interview with author, Dakar, July 26, 2001).

Success as a tailor is based on more than technical expertise. It also requires knowing how to "plug into" the circuitry of Dakar's matrix of propositions. Sophie Ba, manager of Nabil Couture, summarizes the relation between the fashion enterprise and Dakar's visual environment: "to work in fashion, you need to be highly skilled, have a good imagination, and be an astute observer of all that is happening around you" (Sophie Ba, interview with author, Dakar, July 30, 2001). By referring to expertise, creativity, and observation as interdependent qualities for making fashion, Ba's statement echoes a central claim of visual culture studies as articulated by Rogoff who urges consideration of how visual producers interact with images in order to make images (Rogoff 1998: 16). Designers and tailors not only draw information and inspiration from urban visual experience, they are also important agents in shaping it. The dynamic sartorial forms they create are among the most significant elements giving form to the visual traffic of city streets. Central to the processes of information flow, these individuals shape hybrid visual culture in Dakar. Thus, fashion makers not only draw from Dakar's matrix of propositions, they also constitute it with their production.

Tailors in Niayes Thioker

Adjacent to Marche Sandaga, Dakar's largest and most central market, the neighborhood of Niayes Thioker represents a veritable crossroads for information flow. Objects, images, and ideas bustle in and out of this space with ease and regularity. Over the years, the market has grown beyond the confines of its main building, with vendors and stalls overflowing onto the nearby streets of Niayes Thioker. The visuals comprising this space encompass both locally grounded and globally connected images and products. The latest Sean Jean shirts, Air Nikes, and vibrant wax-print cloth combine with fuug jaay or second-hand clothing to offer an astonishing traffic of visual possibilities. Spatially, the neighborhood is also very much a nerve center of urban Dakar. It occupies the borderland between Medina's urban sprawl and upscale downtown, especially Dakar's main thoroughfare, Avenue Georges Pompidou, recognizable by its commercial edifices erected during the colonial and post-independence periods. Clients intent on commissioning the latest and trendiest garments visit tailors in
Niayes Thioker, despite the availability of tailors in their home neighborhoods. Several tailors I interviewed recalled that their clients come to Niayes Thioker from as far away as Pikine, Parcels Assanie, and Nord Foire, all neighborhoods located on Dakar's outskirts. (12) Tailors based in Niayes Thioker contend that being downtown affords them a greater proximity to the latest trends, making their work more desirable for a style-conscious clientele. For instance, tailor Maguette Sy, co-owner of Central Couture, explained that his "studio's location on Avenue Adja Madeline N'gom makes it more connected to an urban pulse" (Maguette Sy, interview with author, Dakar, July 18, 2001; Figure 2).

As Mustapha has also observed, tailors read visual propositions from the streets and the mass media most astutely (Mustapha 2001b: 51). The tailors I interviewed emphasized that images from the media as well as the streets provide them with important sources of visual information. For instance, clothing designs derive from television, especially soap operas such as the Mexican Marimar and music videos by Senegalese and international hip-hop, rap, and popular musicians, among them Vivianne N'dour, Youssou N'dour, and Coumba Diallo Seck. As for the relationship between these resources and the tailors' creative process, several of them explained that when they watch television, especially soap operas and music videos, they do it with an eye towards fashion. Sy recounted, "clients come in here and ask me if I watched a recent episode of Marimar or Sublime Mensonge and describe what a certain actor was wearing" (Maguette Sy, interview with author, Dakar, July 18, 2001).

Music videos are also important sources of visual information. In recent years, favorite designs identified as "mayonnaise" and dialgaty (13) were popularized by Vivianne N'dour's music videos. In the case of mayonnaise, the design consists of a 3/4-length skirt with a V-shaped slit. Even when television does not introduce a new design, it can certainly increase its popularity. For example, Maguette Sy maintained that although he fashioned a garment in the mayonnaise style in 1999, it was N'dour's video the following year that sparked his clients' demand for this design. He explained, "we made this design a while ago, but the video made the dress and dance popular because of the people in it. The dress N'dour wore took the name of the dance" (Maguette Sy, interview with author, Dakar, August 10, 2001).

The connection between popular neighborhood life and fashion production is clearly demonstrated by the wide range of attire made in conjunction with Senegalese soccer victories in World Cup qualifying rounds in late May and early June 2002. The primary site for public celebrations and the exhibition of solidarity was neighborhood streets. When Senegal defeated France, from whom they also gained independence in 1960, tailors enjoyed a boom in business due to fans commissioning tailor-made clothing celebrating the Senegalese victory. In response to market demand, tailors fashioned shirts, boubous, halter-tops, and dresses from cloth replicating the Senegalese flag (Figure 3).

Tailor-made garments were quickly made by many Niayes Thioker tailors and mass-produced T-shirts, bumper stickers, jewelry, and scarves were also available for purchase at Marche Sandaga. In addition to demonstrating the significance of fashion in urban public life, this example underscores the crucial role of tailors' visual production in forging collective identity and fostering solidarity. Their visual productions reflect national pride while reinforcing collective aspirations for global triumph in athletics, further highlighting the place of fashion in post-colonial reinvention. In situations of limited cultural capital, the body offers a strategic site for the representation and contestation of power (Hendrickson 1996, Miessgang 2002, Mudimbe 1991). Positioned in dramatic public displays, the prominently visible "flag fashions" operate as performative opportunities to challenge and realign long-standing relations of power and domination between Senegal and France.
Another significant element in the creative process is dialogue between clients and tailors. Because tailors work by custom order and according to a client's specifications, conversation is essential to developing a particular design. Much as Fabian illustrates in his analysis of conversations with Congolese artist Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, the exchange of ideas and articulation of preferences catalyzes the creative process while offering a conduit for the circulation of information (Fabian 1996). Upon initiating a commission, clients bring in photographs, magazines, or garments in order to explain the design they intend to commission. At the tailor's studio, clients may consult additional clothing catalogs, photo albums of previously rendered designs, or posters showcasing a variety of garments. Clients often select multiple design elements from different sources. For instance, one might choose a certain sleeve length to be combined with a flared cuff, a scalloped neckline, or pockets. Dialogue with tailors then adds new ideas to the mix. Tailors usually sketch out the designs and modify them as they work, as illustrated by the many tailor's drawings tacked to Central Couture's interior walls (Figure 4). Conversations between tailors and clients represent an opportunity to extend creative possibilities and expand the imaginations of both parties.

While tailors acknowledge the importance of conversations with clients, they also emphasize that such discussions are mere points of departure for their creative, artistic expression. They contend that innovations rely on their artistry and imagination, rather than their clients' ideas. The emphasis on artistry is exemplified by a comment from Bira Diouf who stated concisely, "fashion, it is an art ... fabric and scissors are the tools of my expression" (Bira Diouf, interview with author, Dakar, July 26, 2001). Moreover, in discussing their productions, the tailors I interviewed invoked artistic concepts such as originality, invention, authorship, creativity, sensibility, self-expression, and personal style. With particular clothing designs gaining popularity at lightning speed and their replication both feasible and unavoidable, we must consider the significance of tailors locating their visual production within such discursive parameters. Tailors' discourse and its attendant premium on the concepts associated with artistry are powerful tactics for mediating the value of their visual production. Thus, it is with this narrative that tailors construct a professional persona and promote their expertise in order to attract clients. Although clients also promote tailors by word of mouth, and of course, their striking designs advertise themselves, tailors' narrative is an effective marketing strategy. In light of the intense
competition resulting from many tailors working in close proximity, strategies of value inscription are essential to staking out a share of business.

Furthermore, concepts of originality and creativity are values that sustain the enterprise of tailoring for they underpin the very process of commissioning a garment. The premise of a commission implies that a garment will not be mass-produced but developed by way of the client's specifications and the tailor's imagination. The result will be a unique, custom-made garment. Indeed authoring an original design or inventing a style is a key aspect of the tailor's enterprise. Consequently, tailors have seemingly endless opportunities to innovate because they interact with a constantly changing array of clients, each of whom brings their own preferences and ideas to the commission. Maguette Sy explained that it would be unlikely to see the same tailor-made garment worn by more than one person on the street and, even if one observes the same fabric for a dress or boubou, it can be produced, depending on the tailor's expertise and creativity from an endless variety of combined elements (Maguette Sy, interview with author, Dakar, July 18, 2001). The tailor's expressive vocabulary is vast, encompassing a tremendous variety of cloth types and motifs, the cut, length, embroidery designs, and of course, the interpretation of the particular client's commission. Moreover, detail work—gathering, pleating, smocking, darts in strategic places, shoulder pads, ruffles, flounces, scalloped edges, and slits may be added to create visual interest and to define or highlight a client's particular body type (Figure 5). For instance, flattering detail work such as ruffles across the chest may be added to accentuate the client's upper body while highlighting a particular cloth's motif.

The importance of originality in a commissioned garment is demonstrated by the following anecdote. Maguette Sy recounted that one of his clients, after commissioning a dress from Central Couture, implored him to "forget the design" so as to ensure that she owned a one-of-a-kind garment and that others in her neighborhood could not have her design replicated (Maguette Sy, interview with author, Dakar, August 10, 2001). The emphasis on developing original designs also fosters intense competition among tailors, resulting in the need to "hide designs" before they make their inaugural public appearance by their owner. Sy explained, "when you create a design, clients can come to your studio and look at it and then leave to see another tailor to commission my design. Then, the tailor can come to greet me, look at my model and then leave. He can try to copy what he saw exactly but there is always a difference between an original idea and its copy" (Maguette Sy, interview with author, Dakar, August 10, 2001). As suggested above, perhaps the significance of such discourse is not whether a design is original, but rather that tailors seek to inscribe their work with originality. To take credit for their creation and to provide a record of their originality, many tailors including Sy proudly stitch a label into their custom-made attire. As with haute couture design, the inclusion of a label indicates authorship, thus staking a claim to the ownership of a design.

The interactive component of the creative process has particularly extensive ramifications when it comes to tailors' international clientele. In this highly cosmopolitan city, tailors count a diverse group of expatriates and international visitors among their customers. Inter national clients often place orders and transport clothing to other African metropolises like Lagos, Abidjan, Accra, or Bamako. Nabil Couture's Sophie Ba recounted that a sizable segment of her boutique's clientele include "Nigerians and Ivorians who order elaborately embroidered, custom-made Senegalese boubous from Nabil Couture and then carry them back to their home country in a large suitcase" (Sophie Ba, interview with author, Dakar, July 30, 2001). Thus, the custom-made boubou, the undisputed hallmark of Senegalese fashion, is adapted to accommodate tastes and preferences from elsewhere. Several tailors were quick to point out distinct preferences including style, colors, and design motifs, among their international clients. Nabil Couture's Sophie Ba noted, "whereas Senegalese prefer champagne and beige bazin for boubous, clients from Lagos and Abidjan preferred less subtle motifs and vibrant colors" (Sophie Ba, interview with author, Dakar, July 30, 2001). Because tailors' creative output circulates into international networks via their clientele, their role extends beyond Dakar and contributes to the visual and sartorial experience of other urban spaces.

Clothing from Elsewhere

Much as Hansen illustrates in her seminal study on clothing networks and Zambia, clothing from elsewhere figures ubiquitously into Dakar's fashion scene (Hansen 2000). In addition to mass media, public life, and conversations with clients, the availability of imported clothing is a significant element in Dakar's visual and conceptual matrix. Like many cities in Africa, Dakar participates in the circulation of new and used clothing from other parts of the world, especially the United States, Asia, and South Africa. Boutiques and vendors selling imported new and second-hand clothing are widely accessible.
throughout downtown Dakar. New brand name attire such as mass-produced “Gap” jeans, “Levis” overalls, Air Nikes, and Sean Jean shirts (15) are available to many consumers just as is used clothing, called fuug jaay, meaning “shake and sell” in Wolof. (16) The interface of imported clothing with fashion production in Dakar is complex and multifaceted for the presence of imported garments poses both economic concerns and artistic possibilities. My interviews with tailors, merchants, and consumers reveal diverse perspectives about the impact of imported clothing on fashion production in Dakar. Imported clothing is at once immediately distinguished as being from elsewhere and easily absorbed into Dakar's hybrid visual traffic.

Although new Western-style T-shirts, collared shirts, sports jerseys, jogging suits, and trousers are desired by some because of their availability, reasonable price, style, and relatively good quality, they have the disadvantage of being mass-produced and not made to measure. Conversations with friends in Dakar indicate that opinions about imported clothing vary greatly. For some, new imported clothing is desirable and stylish, while others argue that such items are worn only by youth or individuals of lesser financial means. As for second-hand clothing, it is less desirable because it is outdated by the time it is cast off and arrives in Dakar. As with new imported clothing, it is not cut to fit and so does not hang on the body perfectly as should tailor-made attire. For the most part, an individual with resources would ideally only wear custom-made attire. Indeed, the expense of custom-made garments is reflected in the fact that they are typically reserved for important familial ceremonies such as baptisms, called xew (Mustapha 1998: 38).

Imported clothing has a pervasive, though ambiguous impact on the economy of clothing production in Dakar. Tailors Bira Diouf and Balla N'diaye have commented that the availability of used clothing negatively affects the demand for their services. For example, N'diaye recalls making children's school attire until parents realized that they could obtain mass-produced garments more inexpensively and easily (Figure 6). Furthermore, in his former role as president of the National Tailor's Association, Bira Diouf even met with the Minister of Culture to call his attention to the fact that vendors selling imported clothing were diverting business from local tailors (Bira Diouf, interview with author, Dakar, July 26, 2001).

Despite the negative economic implications of imported clothing, these items do factor into local fashion production creatively. In an urban space where one-of-a-kind, custom-made clothing is highly desirable, the influx of new and used clothing offers a steady stream of ever-changing stylistic components. Imported clothing also provides a resource for tailors' production. For example, clients might bring an article of new or used clothing to a tailor to have it replicated or to have certain features such as open cuffs or a particular neckline incorporated into a design. To Balla N'diaye, these items correspond to "potential ingredients in new recipes" (Balla N'diaye, interview with author, Dakar, August 4, 2001). Hansen also reminds us that clothing from elsewhere may mediate localized styles, appropriations and inventions (Hansen 2000: 248). The tailors I interviewed maintained that any article of used clothing can be altered, retouched, or reinvented completely. Tailor Bira Diouf described this process: "if you buy a jacket with two buttons, the tailor can change it, re-cut it and so used clothes can be transformed ... a good tailor could even buy a second-hand bed-sheet and make an expensive dress from it" (Bira Diouf, interview with author, Dakar, July 26, 2001). (17)

An additional perspective on the place of imported clothing in Dakar's fashion landscape was offered by Bobo Sylla, a 28-year-old fashion devotee, aspiring artist, and Niayes Thioker resident. Well-known in his neighborhood for sporting labeled attire, Sylla boasts of his wardrobe which includes Girbaud trousers, Ralph Lauren shirts, and a pair of Gucci loafers, much of which was acquired via secondhand clothing vendors in Dakar's Colobane market, the city's main used clothing market. As with tailor-made garments, the strategic acquisition of imported second-hand clothing also indicates good taste and aesthetic judgment. For Sylla, a self-proclaimed esclave de la mode, second-hand garments afford both a means of self-expression and a way of staying connected to the world of style beyond Dakar. Sylla described the artistry of second-hand attire, "while wearing second-hand clothing can be interpreted as a strategy of making do, style-conscious individuals have made an aesthetic language out of wearing well-labeled, second-hand clothing" (Bobo Sylla, interview with author, Dakar, July 8, 2001). Counting himself among those who have elevated wearing cast-off garments to an aesthetic, Sylla was also quick to mention haute couture designer and former downtown Dakar resident Lamine Kouyate whose label, Xuly Bet, has met with much international appreciation (Rovine 2005). Sylla described Bet's stylish designs as exhibiting an "aesthetic of recuperation," for they refer
to used, second-hand materials by way of frayed seams and well-worn fabric held together with safety pins. (18) While Kouyate represents the "street side" of haute couture, Claire Kane and Oumou Sy exemplify another nuance of urban African fashion production.

Haute Couture Designers in Dakar: Claire Kane and Oumou Sy

In contrast to tailors whose creative output is widely accessible and highly visible to Dakar's mainstream consuming audience, haute couture design is purchased by those with exceptional financial resources, including both Senegalese and expatriates. Although far fewer in number compared to tailors, haute couture designers also figure prominently in the city's fashion scene. Designers Claire Kane and Oumou Sy are dynamic creative forces in Dakar as well as the proprietors of their respective boutiques who oversee a sizable staff of employees. Like the Niayes Thioker tailors, the fashions of both Claire Kane and Oumou Sy grow out of their engagement with Dakar's spectatorial realm.

Born and raised in Paris, Kane is a Senegalese citizen by marriage who has lived in Dakar for more than twenty years. Her training was in neither fashion nor fine arts. Rather, she studied communication and business at the University of Montreal and attributes her understanding of design and aesthetics to her experience traveling in Morocco, Benin, Togo, Nigeria, and Senegal. She refers to herself as a femme de communication first and foremost who believes that "fashion embodies a form of communication and clothing represents a language in itself" (Claire Kane, interview with author, Dakar, July 31, 2001). Her goal in making fashion is not, as she stated, "to simply make clothes, but to make people more beautiful, to communicate, and to express myself" (Claire Kane, interview with author, Dakar, July 31, 2001).

Kane describes her artistic orientation as mode conceptuelle or conceptual fashion conceived in relation to the city. She elaborated, "it is the research I conduct on Dakar's environment that drives my ideas, the forms and the materials" (Claire Kane, interview with author, Dakar, July 31, 2001). The notion that Dakar is a hybrid space is a cornerstone of Kane's work and indeed, her designs are frequently interpreted as epitomizing the hybrid aesthetic of urban Africa (Mensah 2000). Sold from her boutiques in Dakar and Paris, her designs articulate a fusion of local resources with cosmopolitan style.

Since launching her label in Dakar in 1988, Kane produces two seasonal lines per year. (19) Using locally woven cotton cloth, the designer creates several unisex designs, the elements of which are identified with both European and Senegalese fashion. For instance, she combines head-ties with long fitted dresses; boxy, tailored blazers with amply cut drawstring pants, and sporty hooded jackets with sleekly tailored trousers (Figure 7). By combining materials and styles from diverse sources, she creates what fashion writers appreciate as a style that is at once tailored and elegant yet urban and hip (Mensah 2000). At the same time, Kane considers her garments as formal solutions to design problems. Practicality and comfort are fundamental to her designs. As her press book informs us, her designs feature "pockets everywhere, collapsible collars, hooded collars ... clever accessories such as a cell-phone carrier to strap across the shoulders, belts with pockets, featherweight bags, and multipurpose scarves" (Kane 2000: 5).

Each seasonal collection departs from a conceptual premise or theme. Much like a graphic designer, Kane's approach centers on the creation of motifs or signs that visual consumers should be able to "read" in order to comprehend the collection's theme. After designing a motif signifying her conceptual premise, she uses serigraphy to imprint the motif on locally woven cotton cloth, which she then designs and cuts for the garments in each collection. The cloth for her designs is fabricated from locally grown cotton using a technique associated with Mandjak weavers in southern Senegal. Working in the inner courtyard of her boutique, two weavers prepare strips of cotton cloth. In order to adapt this woven cloth to her designs, Kane has modified its dimensions from the standard width of 30 centimeters to 90 centimeters. Mandjak cotton cloth is widely appreciated for its durability as well as attractive appearance. (20) While its surface is usually animated by brightly colored designs in relief against a white or black background, Kane omits the characteristic woven motifs in order to use the woven cloth as a support for her serigraphed motifs.

Kane's imprinted cotton fabrics are both visually engaging and conceptually compelling. Though the cloth is conceived of as the medium for her designs, there is little doubt that it could stand alone as an artwork. In fact, two meters of her woven, serigraphed cloth won the Prix de la Creativite in the 1998
edition of Dak'Art, Senegal's Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary African Art. To highlight the contrast between the motif and the support, she often uses black or blue ink on the cloth support, which includes a range of shades such as deep gray, sky blue, ivory, violet, and sunset orange. The motifs must appear clearly and boldly delineated for they should be recognizable and, as she emphasizes, "readable and able to communicate information" (Claire Kane, interview with author, Dakar, July 31, 2001). Her inaugural collection, focusing on Egyptian hieroglyphs exemplifies her goal of creating recognizable motifs referring to broader issues and themes. Egyptian hieroglyphs point to the historical role of signs while alluding to her interest in pan-African history and identity.

A number of her collections have dealt with contemporary themes and issues relating to the urban environment, especially the increasing globalization of Dakar. Kane views globalization as the key force shaping city life, and she views fashion as the barometer of this globalization, stating, "urban fashion is where globalization is most evident in Africa" (Claire Kane, interview with author, Dakar, July 31, 2001). In two recent collections, she focused on the city's ever-growing engagement with information technology and mass-consumption. She noted that, "in the past few years, an increasing number of internet cafes have sprung up in the city to give people access to email and the internet" (Claire Kane, interview with author, Dakar, July 31, 2001). To address these themes, Kane has designed fabrics featuring the @ symbol, associated with email addresses, and the barcode, the symbol of consumer culture. Other collections pivot around global personalities such as Che Guevara, who the designer calls a "global icon of revolution," and musician Miles Davis, whose cool jazz and hip persona is much appreciated in Dakar (Figure 8). Comparing his melodies to "musical pictures," Kane explained that Davis's visually evocative music conjures up a multitude of images and locates Davis's jazz as growing out of African musical traditions (Claire Kane, interview with author, Dakar, July 31, 2001). A world music aficionado, Kane is especially interested in the musical connection between Africa and the African Diaspora.

A second series dealing with this trans-Atlantic musical connection deploys characters from the Ethiopian alphabet as motifs. The Ethiopian alphabet was intended to allude to the inter-cultural heritage of reggae music and Rastafarian culture. For the designer, both "the rhythms and the lyrics extolling the virtues of freedom, hope, and peace refer to a musical genealogy between the Caribbean and the African continent" (Claire Kane, interview with author, Dakar, July 31, 2001). Her press book further explains that, "music was a means of survival and communication for the Africans uprooted by slavery" (Kane 2000: 5).

Some collections make reference to contemporary events affecting the lives of Dakar's populace while commenting on particular conditions of post-colonialism. The motifs for two collections in particular underscore the problematic relationship between France and its former colonies. In response to the devastating 1994 devaluation of the CFA to the French franc, she created a series dealing with the CFA, the unit of currency for Francophone West Africa. Similarly, the production of cloth depicting a visa stamp followed public uproar about an increase in the denial of Senegalese travel visas to France. This series may be interpreted on two levels. Not only does it allude to the contemporary predicament of border crossing for Senegalese and other African nationals, it also obliquely references Kane's identity as a former French national who has taken on Senegalese citizenship and has traveled extensively in Africa. With this motif, she suggests the ease with which French nationals can reside, let alone travel, to former colonies while highlighting the difficulty with which nationals of former colonies travel to France (Claire Kane, interview with author, Dakar, July 31, 2001). In light of her self-positioning as a "femme de communication" whose work also celebrates various dimensions of pan-African heritage, one might speculate that this series communicates a subtext about the inequity inherent in post-colonial reality.

It is no surprise that Kane refers to her fashion as "100% Dakar," for this slogan expresses the fact that every step in her fashion production, from conception to execution, occurs in this city. That her clothing is fabricated entirely on site is a source of great pride for the designer, for she views her initiative as a mode of economic empowerment for her thirty employees. Although the majority of her clientele in Dakar is composed of expatriates, international visitors, or celebrities such as Youssou N'Dour, Peter Gabriel, and Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade, she asserts that the appreciation and recognition of her work by a local audience is her greatest success.

Unlike Kane, Oumou Sy, another of Senegal's leading designers, is an autodidact whose experimentation with fashion dates to her childhood in Podor, northern Senegal. Sy began fabricating dresses for her dolls when she was eight years old. In addition to making dresses, she also recalls crafting her dolls and her own scissors. By the age of ten, she made clothing for clients and by twelve,
set up her own sewing studio. Sy often attributes her creativity to the freedom of being self-taught (Oumou Sy, interview with author, Dakar, August 10, 2001). She describes, "in my mind, my ideas and my creativity have no limits. I was never trained. Everything I know I learned independently and without rules. I am Peul, my people are nomads, we do not need papers and passports to traverse boundaries. It is what we do" (Oumou Sy, interview with author, Dakar, August 10, 2001). She has also asserted that her creativity is further bolstered by the fact that she is not literate, making fashion her most important vehicle for self-expression.

Although she offers pret-a-porter garments, her unique, experimental haute couture designs are most celebrated (Figure 9). Her designs’ originality and flamboyance underscore that she is indeed unconstrained by the conventions of fashion production. Inventive and resourceful, Sy combines a variety of seemingly incompatible materials such as strip-woven cotton with raffia and organdy with calabash and computer disks. Whether she crafts sleeves from baskets, a bustier from calabashes, or a halter top from beads, her industrious use of materials suggests that she leaves no resource unexplored. Whereas Kane’s garments may be appreciated for their hip style, design solutions, and wearability, Sy delights in creating extravagant designs which she refers to "as a spectacular event" and "objets d’art" in their own right (Sy 2002: 32). Her theatrical flair has made her a favorite costume designer for theater and cinema productions by the late Senegalese filmmakers Ousmane Sembene and Djibril Diop Mambety.

Like the other fashion makers described in this article, Sy ascribes her hybrid environment as central to her artistic creations. In contrast to the other fashion makers interviewed for this article, Sy views Senegal, and not only Dakar, as a source of inspiration. She invokes Senegal's history of metissage, the blending of cultures and peoples, in discussing both her work and her own biography. In particular, she views the mixing of European and African culture, modern technologies and traditional cultures, and urban with rural as the foundation for her fashion making. She elaborates, "if I see a European design for a dress, I can easily outfit it with some African accessories and so create something new. It is this very exchange that is so interesting" (Sy 2002: 32). Her work exemplifies that metissage is a point of departure by way of combining motifs from Senegalese folklore or artistic techniques such as batik, weaving, and embroidery with elements she associates with modernity or globalization such as bowler hats or compact disks. As writer Nicole Smith asks, "where else does Western chic meet Afro-avant-garde but in the creations of Oumou Sy" (Smith n.d.).

Sy is also the founder and host of SIMOD (Semaine Internationale de la Mode de Dakar), which had its fifth edition in June 2001 (Figure 10). (21) SIMOD exemplifies haute couture spectacle. As a platform for fashion designers from Africa and beyond, SIMOD is a relatively exclusive showcase attended primarily by participants in Senegal's culture industries, Dakar-based diplomats, and photographers from fashion magazines such as Marie Claire, Elle, and Amina. It is intended to serve as both a meeting place for designers and an arena for the exhibition of creativity in fashion. At the other end of the spectrum, Sy also organizes the Carnaval de Dakar, an open-air event held in the streets of the Medina. The event, which entails a procession of costumed characters moving through the streets, brings Sy's designs to Dakar's popular audience. Her motivation for hosting this event stems from her desire to share her production with the city's local population whose heritage of metissage and hybrid reality inspires her work. She states, "I just think that it is no good to organize a fashion show in a hall and to leave those who don't have the money to remain outside" (Sy 2002: 33). This event firmly positions her creative work at the intersection of urban visual culture, spectacle, and social space. Not only does her work grow out of Senegal's hybrid visual landscape, for with this event, she returns fashion to the streets of the Medina in particular and Dakar's ocular realm more broadly.

In another illustration of her commitment to popular accessibility, Sy played a principle role in founding Dakar's first Internet cafe, Metissacana in 1996. Moreover, she founded a fashion school, Atelier Leydi, where students learn indigenous techniques for making clothing as well as new technologies. (22) In part because of her entrepreneurial acumen and partly because of her masterful self-fashioning, Oumou Sy enjoys the status of legend in Dakar.

Conclusion

This study has examined fashion production in Dakar by focusing on the relationship between visual production and the urban environment. The point of departure for the production of fashion makers discussed in this article is their location in Dakar and their engagement with the city’s visual realm. By addressing the relationship between fashion and the urban environment, this discussion examines the
complexities of artistry as well as local and global intersections. It also illuminates how fashion making in Dakar draws upon the city's conceptual and visual matrix, the street and the mass media, and finally dialogues in Africa and beyond. In their production, fashion makers not only select from the city's visual and conceptual traffic, they also ever constitute it by creating new propositions for visual consumption.

References


Notes

(1.) While aspirant fashion designers can train at the Ecole de Mode, Coupe, et Couture, part of the national art school, other forms of training such as an apprenticeship with a master tailor or matriculation at one of the city's many tailoring schools are more common paths to working in fashion.

(2.) Due to economic constraints, the majority of tailors in Dakar rent sewing machines and workspace, aspiring to someday own their own machine as well as studio. Other tailors with extensive experience and the right connections might accept employment at one of the city's upscale boubou boutiques such as Nabil Couture, Mandele Couture, and Plateau Broderie. At the high end of the market, these reputable boutiques cater largely to a clientele with the financial resources to purchase elaborately embroidered, custom-made boubous for holidays or special occasions.

(3.) Whereas haute couture designers usually showcase their collections in fashion shows, tailor's creations are given visibility on the city streets and other public or private arenas such as family gatherings and neighborhood events. While haute couture designers such as Claire Kane and Oumou Sy also offer off the rack attire available for purchase in their boutiques, they typically exhibit their work by collection, producing two to three seasonal collections annually. Unlike tailors, the work of haute couture designers is not produced, at least in the strict sense, in consultation with clients who place custom-made orders. Finally, haute couture designers enjoy greater high-profile visibility by way of their coverage in international fashion magazines such as Amina and Elle and their participation in international fashion shows.

(4.) Mirzoeff argues that more attention needs to be focused on the everyday experience of the visual as everyday public life is a central terrain for visual culture studies. He explains that visual culture studies "directs our attention away from structured, formal settings like the cinema and art gallery to the centrality of visual experience in everyday life. Most of our visual experience takes place aside from these formally structured moments of looking ... a painting may be noticed on a book jacket or in an advert; television is consumed as part of domestic life rather than as the sole activity of the viewer."

(5.) The density of images characterizing Dakar's public spaces has been recognized in both scholarship and popular writing such as tourist books. For instance, see Roberts and Roberts (2003: 21). This exhibition catalog opens with the statement that "Dakar is a boldly visual city, images abound."
(6.) These are the brightly painted minibuses that serve as Dakar's public transportation.

(7.) Dibi is a Wolof term for roasted meat, usually lamb, and dibiterie is the restaurant where this meat is sold.

(8.) For more on Amadou Bamba and Mouride visual culture, see Roberts and Roberts (2003).

(9.) Published in France, Amina calls itself the "magazine of Black women."

(10.) Bourdieu conceptualizes a field as a socially structured space within which a discursive formation, like visual art, can function. Bourdieu's cultural field situates artistic works in the social conditions of their production, circulation, and consumption which exist within a kind of cultural circuitry.

(11.) Because this article's focus on is the relationship between urban visual experience and fashion production, it does not intend to examine other variables informing production and shaping consumption, such as economic and social life in Dakar. For more on these themes, see Heath (1992), Mustapha (1998), Rabine (2002), and Scheld (2007). As Mustapha's work shows, socioeconomic crises associated with globalization in the 1990s also had significant consequences for Senegalese cultural production. Her research interrogates the seeming contradiction between financial instabilities and Dakar's thriving clothing culture to reveal how fashion consumption is a strategy of empowerment responding in part to wide-scale economic restructuring (Mustapha 1998).

(12.) Clients typically work with multiple tailors. They choose a tailor for a commission depending on their objectives and the tailor's particular strengths. That is, a client who would commission Maguette Sy for a trendy outfit, may go to another tailor to replicate a garment. A great deal of variety and specialization distinguishes the city's many tailors. Some are celebrated for their original designs while others are known for their meticulous replication of clothing models advertised in catalogs, often from the United States, or garments acquired in Dakar and abroad.

(13.) Dialgaty is a Wolof word meaning to trip a person up or knock them over. It also has a sexual connotation.

(14.) Tailors' studios occasionally display a "decorative" poster sold to them by itinerant vendors from Nigeria. Because Senegalese rarely identify with the styles depicted in the poster, tailors described the posters as decorative, offering little more than points of departure for discussion.

(15.) The origin of these garments is ambiguous. It is assumed that they are the "real thing" produced by American manufacturers. Several interviewees have said that no factories for producing imitation label clothing exist in Senegal. Rather, these items are exported from China or Nigeria.

(16.) The term shake and sell suggests that it is desirable to shake off the dust accumulated on the garments during their movement from their previous owner to the sales context.

(17.) Mustapha (1998) notes a similar example, but associates it with a subversion and defiance of Western forms (p. 31).

(18.) The term recuperation refers to a method of making art using found or salvaged materials. This term was widely used by fine arts artists in Dakar in the late 1990s when they responded to a dearth of new art materials at Dakar's Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts by salvaging used materials such as horse shoes, aluminum cans, driftwood, and metal reinforcement bars (or rebars) as their expressive media. Salvaged materials continue to afford important artistic resources for artists in Dakar and other parts of Africa. For more see Grabski (2008).

(19.) Kane noted that she occasionally creates a third collection for Muslim and Christian holidays.

(20.) Other Dakar-based designers, including Aissa Dione and Oumou Sy, have begun to fabricate shawls and handbags using cotton cloth made in the Mandjak weaving tradition.

(21.) At the time of this writing, the future of SIMOD is uncertain. Oumou Sy has not announced when or if she will continue to host this important event.

(22.) Leydi means earth in the Pular language and refers to teaching of traditional techniques at the foundation of student training.
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