Kabas & Couture

CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN FASHION

Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art
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> People have been fashionable for years… in Accra especially. The fashion would come based on those who were coming o the ships, who were coming o the planes. The fashion moved here even as there was no TV and all that. So people were fashionable...
>
> — Nana Konadu Ageyman Rawlings, 2012, Former First Lady of Ghana

Fashion, an inherently cross-cultural and elite-oriented form of dress that embodies change through innovation, is one of the most meaningful and visually present forms of artistic expression on the African continent. The signi cance of African fashion is rapidly gaining recognition in academia, particularly in the eld of art history (Gott and Loughran 2010, Hansen and Madison 2013, and Rovine 2015). Kabas and Couture: Contemporary Ghanaian Fashion is one of the rst American exhibitions to focus on the cultural and historical signi cance of African fashion, centering speci cally on the dynamic and enduring production of women's fashion in Accra, Ghana from the 1950s through the 21st century. Whereas the garments on display attest to the beauty, creativity, and vibrancy of Ghana's complex fashion culture, this publication provides a more detailed account of individual designers and the historical precedence of Accra's co-existing spheres of designer and kaba fashions. The ultimate intent of this exploration of Ghanaian fashion is to expand our understanding of fashion beyond Western predilections by shifting focus to the African continent.

Juliana "Chez Julie" Norteye Akwadzan
Late 1960s
Wax print
Gift of Edith Francois

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY DESIGNER FASHIONS IN ACCRA

As the capital of Ghana, Accra has served as a nexus for the exchange and creation of diverse and varied forms of dress, encouraging the development of a complex and vibrant fashion culture. The historical importance of fashion in Accra is evidenced by early issues of the Sunday Mirror, a weekly publication that consistently highlighted the cultural events and sartorial preferences of Accra's diverse citizens. One of the earliest archived copies of the Sunday Mirror, dated August 16, 1953, featured photographs of two Ghanaian women on its front page in the midst of volleying a tennis ball. The photographs were accompanied by the following captions: "beach type slacks set new fashion note" and "shorts are still in favor" ("Over to You" 1953: 1). This particular feature, coupled with the repeated coverage of diverse dress styles including Indian saris, East Asian qipaos, and the latest European couture creations, illustrates that a complex and dynamic fashion culture was rmly established in Accra by the 1950s, if not earlier.

Ajepomaa Design Gallery
Evening Gown
2011
Leather and wax print
Premiered at the Vlisco
"Delicate Shades" 2011
Runway Show
On loan from a private collection

"THE QUEEN OF FASHIONS": THE DESIGNER FASHIONS OF JULIANA "CHEZ JULIE" NORTEYE

The importance of fashion to the citizens of Accra, particularly styles that were viewed as unusual and innovative, created space for the development of the country's rst formally-trained fashion designer Juliana Norteye (known by her designer label "Chez Julie"[1]). Norteye was one of twelve children, born in 1933 in the town of Nsawam, Ghana. After completing her education through standard seven, Norteye began working at the Ministry of Education, where she continued sewing "as a hobby, for people, all the time. She sewed to make ends meet" (2012: personal interview). During this time Norteye made her rst appearance in a 1958 edition of the Sunday Mirror A column posed the question, "What makes our girls look so lovely?" The answer: "one of Norteye's latest fashions," a dress she named "the Hall and Chamber frock" ("These New Fashions" 1958: n. pag.). The columnist then turned his attention to Norteye, suggesting "this charming beauty has hundreds of them [fashions] in her head. Be it warm or cold weather she has something new to wear. No wonder, for lovely Juliana Norteye is a fashionable dress-maker in Accra, who always has something smart to o er her customers" (1958: n. pag.).

[1] "Chez Julie's" married name was Juliana Kwei o-Okai, although the majority of historical documentation refers to her as Juliana Norteye, or simply "Chez Julie."

Figure 1
Juliana “Chez Julie” Norteye
Kente Kaba
Late 1960s
Gift of Edith Francois

Despite her initial success, Norteye wanted to formally train in the art of fashion and dressmaking. In 1958, Norteye was awarded a partial scholarship from the Cocoa Marketing Board to attend France’s oldest fashion school, Ecole Guerre-Lavigne. Norteye’s scholarship was part of an initiative created by Ghana’s first president Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah’s goal in awarding overseas scholarships was to ensure that members of Ghana’s population were provided with the highest quality of education in specific fields. By fostering the development of “experts” in a variety of occupations, Nkrumah sought to establish the creation of a highly-educated group of Ghanaians who would contribute to his nation-building and disseminate their knowledge to future generations.

Norteye departed for Paris at the age of twenty-six and embarked upon a journey that taught her the intricacies of garment construction, pattern drafting, and design. Her return to Accra was celebrated in the January 14th, 1961 issue of the Daily Graphic with the headline “Julie —The Girl from Paris.” Several months later, Norteye had already begun to make her mark on Accra’s fashion culture, earning the appellation “Queen of Fashions” from the Sunday Mirror; she was further described as possessing “first-hand knowledge of everything that would enhance the beauty of Ghanaian womanhood” (“Julie” 1961: 8).

Norteye created fashion garments for the next thirty years, until her untimely death in 1993 at the age of sixty. For the majority of her career, Chez Julie was the fashion designer in Accra. She hosted annual fashion shows, regularly created garments for the promotional materials of Ghana’s first wax print manufacturing company GTP (Ghana Textiles Production), and catered to everyone from Ghana’s former first ladies to women who simply aspired to be dressed by Chez Julie. As one Ghanaian recounted, her British father insisted that all of her special occasion garments were made by Chez Julie, as she was “the best” in Accra.

Despite Norteye’s importance in establishing a distinctly Ghanaian designer fashion culture in Accra, few of her original garments remain. The Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art is fortunate to include two of Norteye’s oldest and most important garments in this exhibition: her Kente Kaba (Figure 1) and the female version of her Akwadzan (Figure 2)[2]. The kaba, which will be discussed in detail in the following section, is a historically-rooted

[2] Akwadzan is a Ga word that implies the dress practice of wrapping the upper torso with cloth.

women's garment that symbolizes Ghanaian heritage and identity. What makes Norteye's kaba signi cant is not the garment's silhouette, but her chosen material: Norteye created this particular kaba from hand-woven kente cloth, a textile typically associated with Ghanaian traditional culture and Ashanti chieftaincy. As Norteye's sister Edith Francois explained, "at one time, kente was very expensive…now we have a lot of imitation, but kente, people didn't want to cut…kente was precious" (Francois 2012: personal interview). When Francois rst wore her sister's kente fashions, which included a range of skirts, suits, and blouses with kente collars, her mother-in-law proclaimed "oh, you've spoiled your kente!" (2012: personal interview) Francois disagreed, valuing the tailored kente because "you know that you will wear it, and you'll wear it, and you'll wear it, and it's not spoiled" (2012: personal interview). Francois appreciated her sister's kente fashions because they were more wearable than traditional attire; the designs re ected a unique blend of Ghanaian historical dress practices and a cosmopolitan approach to dressing that encapsulated the attitudes of Accra's post-independence population.

Norteye's most innovative and culturally signi cant garment is her Akwadzan, originally created in 1968 and o cially unveiled at Ghana's 1971 annual Trade Fair. The garment was originally conceived as a form of attire for men and women, mimicking the historical men's dress practice of wrapping the upper torso in cloth, a form of dress that can often be di cult and cumbersome to maintain. Following its premiere, the Daily Graphic newspaper celebrated Norteye's Akwadzan, stating "for the rst time in the history of Ghanaian fashion, the men's cloth has been converted into a manageable out t with an opening for the head" ("Something for the Men" 1971: 7). The columnists' claims were further supported by the recollections of Francois, who stated that Norteye created the tailored Akwadzan "to make it easy for people to put on the traditional cloth because you've seen the men, they're always adjusting" (Francois 2012: personal interview).

Norteye's female Akwadzan is included in this exhibition and is one of the most avant-garde of Norteye's designs. The practice of wrapping the upper torso with cloth, in a "toga" style, was almost exclusively the prerogative of Ghanaian men. By transforming a style of dress viewed as a symbol of masculinity and men's traditional

Figure 2
Juliana "Chez Julie" Norteye
Akwadzan
Late 1960s
Wax print
Gift of Edith Francois

Figure 3
Christie Brown
Evening Gown
2010
Satin and wax print
Premiered at 2010
African Fashion Week

leadership into a stylish garment for young female Ghanaians, Norteye's Akwadzanchallenged established gender norms while revolutionizing and reinvigorating established cultural and historical dress practices. The form of the garment itself, comprised of a voluminous, yet attering silhouette, was an additional challenge to the accepted forms of women's historical fashions, which were primarily tailored and overtly feminine.

Norteye's fashions illuminate a period of rapid modernization and innovation in Accra that happened immediately following Ghana's independence in 1957. By melding local materials and styles of dress with global silhouettes and techniques, Norteye transformed traditional Ghanaian garments into more wearable and stylish forms of dress. Her designs sustained the relevance of historical dress practices and materials to Accra's cosmopolitan elite by encapsulating their global, yet decidedly local and nationalist identities.

"IT'S BEAUTIFUL IN OUR EYES AGAIN": ACCRA'S CONTEMPORARY FASHION DESIGNERS

Chez Julie was a pioneer of Ghanaian fashion whose exuberant creations paved the runways for future generations of designers in Accra, exempli ed by those included in this exhibition: Aisha Ayensu (Christie Brown), Ajepomaa Mensah (Ajepomaa Design Gallery), Brigitte Merki (BM Designs), Sumaya Mohammad and Kabutey Dzietror (Pistis), and Aya Morrison (Aya Morrison). This new generation of designers is primarily focused on reinvigorating wax print fabric, blending the material with international styles of dress and other imported fabrics to create garments that re ect a youth-oriented, cosmopolitan and nationalist aesthetic, a reimagining of the creative intent that motivated many of Accra's past fashion designers, including Chez Julie.

Aisha Ayensu, the designer of Christie Brown and the most successful of Accra's young fashion designers, exempli es this generation's approach to revitalizing wax print. Ayensu explained the impetus for creating the Christie Brown label: "the whole idea was to nd interesting ways of using African print. There is always some element of the print in my designs" (2012: personal interview). Ayensu's continued use of wax print extends beyond her e orts to reimagine the material; she believes that the fabric serves as a symbol of her Ga heritage[3].

[3] The Ga are an indigenous group of people that live primarily in Southern Ghana.

Ayensu admitted that, “I know wax print didn’t come from here…but even though it’s not from here, it’s become our culture. We embraced it and it has become our thing…that’s the tradition bit” (2012: personal interview).

What separates Ayensu’s garments from the work of other emerging fashion designers is her physical manipulation of speci c materials. Unlike the majority of Ghanaian designers who rely on large swaths of wax print fabric to create their garments, Ayensu blends luxurious European fabrics with wax print in subtle and often surprising ways. Her yellow satin evening gown exempli es this approach, as the garment’s sweetheart neckline and areas of the bodice are nely edged with thin strips of wax print (Figure 3).

Ayensu’s emphasis on detailing resulted in her creation of innovative embellishments that challenged the expected forms of wax print fabric. As part of her 2010 Arise Fashion Week collection, Ayensu used wax print to create fabric covered buttons and horizontal fringe, which she used to adorn her garments. By festooning her stylistically simple and boldly colored garments with an explosion of dynamic, wax print detailing, Ayensu ensured that the garment’s embellishments served as the focal point, creating a collection in which her predominantly European silhouettes were transcended by her careful and detailed inclusion of wax print fabric. As an additional part of this collection, Ayensu created a range of necklaces featuring her fabric covered buttons and horizontal fringe, which quickly became highly sought-after accessories in Accra. Ayensu’s wax print button necklaces currently serve as uno cial symbols of the Christie Brown label and have been relentlessly copied by aspiring designers from around the world, including the United States and South Africa. These imitations encourage her to continually reimagine her bib necklaces, with her latest iteration taking the form of removable collars punctuated by metal studs, as seen at the 2014 Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Africa in Johannesburg, South Africa (Figure 4).

Like other Ghanaian fashion designers, Ajepomaa Mensah, creator of Ajepomaa Design Gallery, was initially inspired by her mother, who would regularly sew clothing for her children. Mensah chose to pursue a career in fashion design, graduating in 2005 from the LaSalle College of Arts in Singapore

Figure 4
Christie Brown Collection, Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2014, photo by Christopher Richards

with a degree in fashion design and merchandising. Following the completion of her degree, Mensah traveled to New York City where she interned with fashion design companies Jil Stuart and Searle and worked in various fashion retail positions.

When Mensah returned to Accra in 2009, she recollected:

> “I did not understand this whole phenomenon behind wax print. Growing up, my grandmother and my mom…middle-aged women…wore the African print. They wore it beautifully, but they wore it in the traditional sense of the kaba and slit. The women wore it as a form of maturity and re nement. Growing up, we were in uenced by urban cultures, we wanted to look hip and cool, so we were not really drawn to the African print” (2012: personal interview).

Figure 5
Pistis
Dress
2012
Lace, patchwork,
wax print
Designed for the 2012
"Ready-to-wear"
Summer Collection

Mensah was encouraged by a family friend and fashion designer to explore the fabric markets in Accra and after a month of combing the stalls for materials, Mensah came to the following conclusion: "we have a market full of fabrics, why don't we just go and try and work with it and make it ours" (2012: personal interview). Mensah's approach to design is similar to Ayensu's, highlighting her use of wax print by restricting the material to speci c details of her garments, such as a wax print collar or edging along the neckline and armholes of a dress. Her designs are often edgy and imbued with a degree of youthfulness, exempli ed by her provocative evening gown of wax print fabric, lace, and leather adorned with metal studs (Figure 6). Mensah does not limit herself to wax print and has begun to incorporate materials from other African countries, as seen in her cocktail dress of woven fabric from Burkina Faso (Figure 8).

The Pistis label was established by Kabutey Dzietror and Sumaiya Mohammed while they were enrolled in fashion courses at the Vogue Style School of Fashion and Design in Accra. After graduating in 2008 with certi cates in fashion design, Dzietror and Mohammed continued to develop their skills as fashion designers and opened the Pistis boutique in 2011. Their main focus is to create a ordable, expertly sewn garments from predominantly wax print fabrics. Dzietror and Mohammed's garments often feature a blending of wax print with more luxurious fabrics, particularly lace. This is illustrated by a small collection of garments released in April 2012, which featured a range of cocktail dresses sewn from white eyelet and lace fabrics, juxtaposed with horizontal strips of patchwork wax print fabric (Figure 5). Additionally, Pistis is known for their elaborate and elegant evening gowns, exempli ed by the green satin and wax print gown they created for the 2011 Vlisco fashion show (Figure 7). These two garments testify to the diversity of Dzietror and Mohammed's designs and to the variety of wax print fashions in Accra's contemporary fashion culture.

Unlike the other designers featured in this exhibition, neither of Brigitte Merki's garments include wax print fabric. Her two garments feature a hybrid form of Ghanaian kente cloth and Nigerian ashoke cloth, called "kente-oke" by the cloth's creator, Nanahemaa Asaasafoa II, Queen of Akromo e. Merki designed these two garments as part of a larger collection that premiered in 2011. The intent of Merki's collection was to depict her Ghanaian-Swiss heritage through the use of speci c materials and styles of dress. This is most evident in her cocktail dress sewn from imported Swiss lace and blue and white "kente-oke" cloth, materials that serve as tangible representations of Merki's multicultural identity (Figure 9). The silhouette of the dress, inspired by the dirndl (a traditional style of dressing for German and Swiss women), further indicates her Swiss heritage. Merki's expertly-crafted designs exemplify the inherent originality of Accra's contemporary fashion culture and further illustrate how other historically signi cant textiles, such as kente cloth, are being reimagined by Accra's contemporary fashion designers.

Figure 6
Ajepomaa Design Gallery
Evening Gown
2011
Leather and wax print
Premiered at the Vlisco
"Delicate Shades" 2011
Runway Show
On loan from a
private collection

Figure 7
Pistis
Evening Gown
2011
Satin and wax print
Premiered at the Vlisco 2011
"Dazzling Graphics"
Runway Show
On loan from a
private collection

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY KABA FASHIONS

When discussing fashion, emphasis is typically placed on designer fashions: garments associated with elite status and created by recognized individuals who champion innovation (such as the majority of garments on display in Kabas and Couture). Designer fashions are only part of Accra's dynamic fashion culture. A second sphere exists, comprised primarily of a form of dress worn by a majority of Ghanaian women: the kaba, or kaba and slit. Kaba fashions are the most recognizable and visible form of women's attire in Accra. The diversity of styles and fabrics creates a kaleidoscopic display of dress that is performed daily, transforming the streets of Accra into informal runways for showcasing sartorial experimentation and novelty. Unlike most forms of fashion, the kaba is an inherently egalitarian form of dress, worn equally by street vendors and first ladies. The inclusion of kaba fashions in this exhibition is to formally recognize the importance of this dynamic form of dress and to further illustrate the vibrancy and complexity of Accra's fashion culture.

The kaba is a fusion of international and local dress styles that signifies a distinctly Ghanaian identity. As a Ghanaian explained to art historian Suzanne Gott, "kaba is our national custom. It's our real Ghanaian dress" (Gott 2013: 19). The kaba is typically created from six yards of fabric, with two yards used for each of the garment's three integral elements: a tailored blouse, a sewn or wrapped skirt, and an additional piece of fabric used primarily as a wrapper or shawl. As elucidated by Gott, Ghana's distinctive three-piece kaba was created when a European-inspired blouse was added to the existing wrapped ensemble of Ghanaian women's dress; the earliest illustration of this hybrid garment appeared in the 1831 account of a British woman's travels along the coast of West Africa (2010: 13).

THE REIGN OF THE "JAGUAR": KABA FASHIONS DURING THE 1950S

Despite the popularity of the kaba during the nineteenth century, by the early twentieth century it "became a mode of dress largely associated with 'illiterates,' or women without formal schooling" (2010: 14). Immediately prior to and following Ghana's independence in 1957 and encouraged by Nkrumah's exaltation of indigenous forms of dress, the status of the kaba was restored; it quickly became a symbol of Ghana's national heritage and a form of dress that was debated, celebrated, and routinely worn by fashion-conscious Ghanaian women.