AFRICAN PRINT FASHION NOW!
A STORY OF TASTE, GLOBALIZATION, AND STYLE

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Akosombo Textiles Limited of Ghana

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IN 2007 GHANA’S LARGEST TEXTILE FACTORY, Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL), celebrated its fortieth anniversary at the luxurious La Palm Royal Beach Hotel in Accra (fig. 3.1). The event brought together government figures, the local business elite, customers, and foreign dignitaries, including Mrs. Madeline Wong-Charlton, daughter of famed ATL founder Cha Chi Ming. ATL executive chairman Walter Esposito, a Swiss expatriate and long-time Ghana resident, spoke, commenting on the “lovely ladies dressed in ATL or ABC prints.” ABC, the well-known British wax-print firm, had been recently acquired by ATL’s parent company, Cha Textiles Group, and had moved to Akosombo from Manchester.1

Akosombo is the name of Ghana’s largest hydroelectric dam, completed in 1965, and the model city built at the foot of the dam where the ATL factory is located. “Akosombo” has also become shorthand for any print cloth manufactured in Ghana (Manu 1998, 16). In the popular perception, ATL is a national company that produces a variety of African-print cloths. Although in his speech Esposito noted the presence of Madeline Wong-Charlton and other Cha Textiles Group executives, he did not dwell on the fact that most of ATL belongs to this Hong Kong-based, multinational textile conglomerate, and thus a Chinese company has ironically become an icon of national textile production in Ghana.2

Beginnings

Ultimately, it was a collaboration between a Swiss company and a Hong Kong-based entrepreneur that would lead to a textile factory at Akosombo (fig. 3.3). The Swiss Basler Handels-Gesellschaft, originally part of the Basel Mission, had been active in West Africa since 1859. Its operation in colonial Ghana had been run by the Union Trading Company (UTC) since 1921. In the following decades, UTC played a role in exporting Ghanaian cocoa and importing consumer commodities, among them high-quality wax prints, known as Swiss Real Wax, manufactured at its Holenstein factory in Emmenda-Glarus, Switzerland. In the 1960s UTC withdrew from the cocoa trade and invested in department stores and motor shops. Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah personally attended the inauguration of the UTC flagship department store in Central Accra in 1956, one year prior to independence (Franc 2008, 205;
Wanner 1959, 453–54). By the early 1960s, however, production costs at the Swiss textile factory had increased, and in Ghana, UTC activities suffered from limited import licenses and high import duties. Since UTC was unable to repatriate accumulated profits, it decided to establish a textile factory in Ghana.²

The participation of three Swiss UTC employees was crucial to this endeavor. By 1966 the aforementioned Walter Esposito was in charge of the UTC office in Kumasi, and had close connections with government officials. René Goettin had met Cha Chi Ming, a Hong Kong–based entrepreneur who had launched a textile factory in the northern Nigerian city of Kaduna in 1964. Eager to expand his operations, Cha entered a joint venture with UTC to establish a Ghanaian textile factory. Dr. Alfred Vachter, UTC director for West Africa, proved instrumental in diversifying the company’s activities.⁴

Cha contributed the technical staff from his Hong Kong–based China Dyeing Works to train the Ghanaian staff. Production started in December of 1967. In its first year of operation, ATL produced twelve million yards of cloth with a workforce of 530 Ghanaians and 50 expatriates and made a small profit. The modern ATL factory, with state-of-the-art equipment and its own laboratory, permitted different processes, including real wax, roller engraving, photo engraving, screen-printing, and eight-color printing machines.⁵ Holenstein transferred its knowhow to ATL, selling its secret processes of real-wax production.⁶ Although UTC initially held sole distribution rights for ATL products, it was unable to sell all of ATL’s textiles. ATL found that it could sell directly to other large customers and UTC competitors, such as the United Africa Company (UAC), Compagnie Française de l’Afrique de l’Ouest, and the Ghana National Trading Company. UTC textile manager, however, had to clear these sales. Vachter stipulated that UTC maintain control over the designs and decide which competitors could purchase them and the amount.⁷ In 1969 UTC and ATL added weaving facilities at the Akosombo factory, followed by spinning.

Launching ATL Fabrics
A large group of women cloth traders did the work of promoting and selling ATL fabrics. UTC called them “passbook holders.” Otto Hauri, a Swiss employee who ran UTC’s textile department in Ghana from 1962 to 1977, recalled that each woman received a 5 percent commission for cloth she sold and any profit above that. The passbook listed credits and debits. Most of these female traders operated as retailers by selling cloth directly to customers. Some were also wholesalers by passing on their stock to other retailers. UTC selected the cloth for the “passbook holders,” and Hauri emphasized a fair allocation but noted that preferred customers received larger shares. In Accra, UTC had about five hundred “passbook holders,” in its other distribution centers hundreds more (fig. 3.4).⁸
ATH had taken over the Hohlenstein repertoire and continued producing its popular wax-resist prints. Wachter urged the opening of a design office to develop new patterns for fancy prints and real wax with the goal of becoming a "leader in fashion." He wanted UTC, under the oversight of Goettin, to receive "first refusal" for all designs. He also wanted the design office to remain separate from sales, since he felt that Hauri had distinctly "conservative taste." To secure control over new designs and register them under the UTC name, Wachter placed the design office within UTC with ATH merely executing its creations. Should UTC ever lose sole distribution rights for ATH fabrics, ATH could then only print the registered designs by paying a royalty.9

In the end, however, Hauri took charge of the design office, which consisted of two Dutch expatriates and a Ghanaian staff. He especially praised one Ghanaian designer, Ablade Glover, who could draw and had a "superb eye" to Glover, later a professor of art in Kumasi and now an internationally renowned painter, worked for the UTC Textile Division as a student at the Kumasi College of Technology and then for the Design Office in the late 1960s. He recalled that while conducting customer research, Hauri visited places like Makola Market, where Glover himself would never have ventured. "He knew the market women, their thinking, and...what they wanted." Fierce competition existed between UTC and UAC, and according to Glover, whenever UTC launched a popular new design, Hauri instructed his staff to develop something similar without violating "the copyright thing." Glover did a few designs that are "still classics." He noted, "Sometime, when I walk in town, I see somebody wearing one, and I say—wow this is my cloth!" The cloth Woko Aware a Bisa! (If you go to marry, ask) is one of them. These days, Glover observed, designs are more fleeting; nobody conducts the kind of market research that Hauri once did (fig. 3.5).

Despite these efforts to accommodate local desires, Ghanaians had to be convinced that wearing locally produced print cloth was acceptable. Hauri recalled that as soon as ATH began producing high-quality products, its prestige increased, and it became popular for its colors." Trader Maame Adwoa Mansah, however, remembered a slower process: "In the beginning...we did not like [ATH cloth]...it was only for those going to farm...They mock you when you put it on.... If somebody was well-to-do, she would not buy Ghana cloth, she would say, 'I like foreign cloth, Holland,'" meaning Dutch wax made by Viscose. For Mansah the hierarchy was Viscose, Ghana Textiles Printing (GTP), which belonged to UAC, and finally ATH.

Goettin, seeking to expand the customer base for ATH, especially among Ghana's elite, suggested inviting Mrs. Laura Quartey, wife of the first Ghanaian chief executive of the Volta River Authority, E. L. Quartey, to serve as "Fashion Design Consultant." Cha welcomed the idea and wanted her on the ATH staff, but Goettin preferred that UTC hire her and Wachter concurred.8 Her job was to "contact suitable artists and designers to produce textile designs." She was to maintain close contacts with markets and visit Kumasi and Lome in neighboring Togo every three months."
Fashion Shows

Esposito, who eventually took over public relations and market research at VRC, became very involved in promoting ATRI fabrics among the wealthy and powerful in Ghana. Part of this effort was the staging of ATRI fashion shows. The first took place at the Akosombo Swimming Pool in 1969. Sandy Pan, the Chinese ATRI general manager from 1967 to 1979, recalled that his staff built a runway across the pool and installed lights so the models seemed to be walking on water. In December of 1971 a fashion show took place at the Beach Combo Club behind Accra’s premier Ambassador Hotel. Esposito came up with the idea of hiring the dance company Heat Waves to serve as models. At the event, a man and a woman presented outfits consisting of slim pants and jackets tailored from ATRI prints, while dancing to live music (fig. 3.7). With a beaming smile, a tall model showed off a long skirt with matching top and short cape (fig. 3.6), and introducing ATRI beachwear were a couple dressed in hot pants and long-sleeved shirts in matching fabric.

The provocative styles shown at ATRI fashion shows engaged with discussion about fashion in Ghana and across Africa. In Accra’s popular weekly *The Mirror,*
Carlton Ashun wondered whether miniskirts would lead to prostitution and other immoral behavior, pointing out that such attire had been banned in Malawi and Tanzania. Yaa Yaa, another columnist, offered a spirited defense of fashion-conscious "girls in minis or slits or boys in bell bottomed, fancy trousers or lace shirts." In its reporting, The Mirror sought to support the local textile industry. In one issue, it introduced designer Eunice Shaw modeling her butterfly dress made from the cloth called Yass Berko and reminded readers, "Thanks to our textile factories, at Tema and Akosombo, which are constantly introducing new designs, there are plenty of varieties to choose from."

In 1979 URC suffered when its parent company in Basel, Switzerland, faced a serious crisis after its London office lost millions of pounds sterling in the cocoa commodity trade. With Basel under pressure to pay off debts, URC had to sell its ATL shares to Cha the following year. Cha then recruited Esposito to work full-time for ATL, and Esposito took over the liaison role with the government.

Designers typically had connections with Accra's elite, and designer Nancy Kotei, for example, was the wife of Colonel Robert Kotei, a leading member of the
AKOSOMBO TEXTILES LTD.
1972

3.6
The cover page for the first AN calendar (1972) shows young people dressed in the company’s fabrics and on the move.
COURTESY WALTER ESPOSITO ACCRA.

3.9
A model dressed in AN fabric leans against a tractor on the ATL calendar page for November/December 1975.
COURTESY WALTER ESPOSITO ACCRA.

3.10
Models pose in the door of the AN plane on the AN calendar page for November/December 1979.
COURTESY WALTER ESPOSITO ACCRA.
military government. Esposito featured her work at a show in the Star Hotel (fig. 3.1). For atl’s fifth anniversary, he arranged a dinner and dance for atl customers at the Banquet Hall of the State House in Accra. The Mirror reported: “Top models from many of the city’s fashion houses modelled new and latest Akosombo prints before a large audience of guests,” which included members of the government and chiefs. Featured designers included Beryl Kikari presenting an evening gown with a turtle neck, Paul Mensah showing sportswear, and Eileen Mills introducing beachwear that featured a high slit and a short dress and a flowing coat, made from the same patterned print.21

Akotex
In addition to the fashion shows, Esposito developed a second strategy to make atl a household name among Ghanaians, especially young people. Esposito and the Chinese spinning manager at atl, Shing-chi Woo, began to observe the talent displayed by various staff during recreational soccer games at the factory, and in 1969 they decided to found the soccer club Akotex. After a few friendly matches against other company teams, Akotex joined the national second division and quickly moved up the ranks.22 Woo and Esposito then began to recruit professional players. One of them was Eric Amankwah, who grew up in Nkawie, played for Okwahu United, and joined Akotex in 1970. Seth K. Anshah was picked off the field in a match against Akotex. Although these professional players were ostensibly atl employees assigned to departments such as chemical supplies, they trained daily in the morning and evening and, in the perception of their co-workers, “didn’t do any work.”23 The club quickly made a name for itself, and by 1971, “troublesome Akotex,” as Eric Segoh of the Daily Graphic reported, was in the first division, Ghana’s premier league, and competed for the championship.24

In its captivating games, Akotex was not only playing “entertainment football,” as veteran sports writer Ben Bediako recalled, but also popularizing atl fabrics.25 Anshah added, “We were advertising atl with the football club.” Wherever the team traveled, they wore atl prints. Esposito, the club’s chief patron, arranged for Akotex to travel to Austria to play against other company teams.26 John Gyasi, a long-time Ghanaian atl employee, commented that “Akotex made atl popular” and made the factory and its fabrics well-known throughout Ghana. Akotex became a cultural phenomenon that reflected the aspirations of the youth to challenge not just established soccer teams but also Ghana’s social order. Young women embracing this rebellious spirit were called “Akotex girls.”27 Akotex stayed in the premier league for a decade, and the success of the “soccer ‘electricians’ from Akosombo,” as The Mirror called the team, was a breakthrough for atl.28 What were once fabrics known primarily in the south became a national textile label.29

Calendars
atl became a household name without ever advertising in the local press, relying on informal channels, such as the hundreds of traders who sold its fabrics. There was yet another way that atl popularized its products, again evoking the image of stylish, modern youth. Starting in 1972, Esposito produced elaborate calendars that were given to atl customers. The first featured young models dressed in atl fabrics and on the move. It was photographed by the Swiss artist Ueli Staub (fig. 3.8).30 The images ranged from a model wearing a version of the Aban Kaba cloth at the entrance of Cape Coast Castle to stylish women on the presidential yacht at Volta Lake.

The 1975 calendar featured the cotton farm atl had acquired along the Volta River to limit its cotton imports and contribute to the military government’s policy of “self-reliance.”31 The images celebrated the technological advances of mechanized farming, depicting models with tractors and bulldozers, and posing among bales of raw cotton (fig. 3.g). The 1979 calendar featured Ghana’s Kotoka international airport, depicting models standing with the plane that atl had acquired to export its products to Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone (fig. 3.10).32 Other calendars evoked moments of leisure. atl occasionally staged public spectacles to launch a new fabric, such as the gold label, a three-color super wax print, which was presented at Makola Market in the early 1990s.33 The atl calendars were an early form of fashion posters, which became popular in Ghana starting in the 1990s (Gott 2010, 24).
ATL—A Success Story?
The history of ATL is to a large degree a success story, challenging the notion that most industrial companies in postcolonial Ghana were failures. What started as a Swiss-Chinese collaboration became a Chinese company by the early 1970s. Later, due to nationalization, ATL had to sell 26 percent of its shares to Ghanaians. The design process at ATL linked personal artistry with industrial production. The company’s quality production, its traditional and innovative designs, its skillful marketing, which introduced its fabrics at glamorous fashion shows and popularized them on the soccer pitch, created ATL’s success. ATL has indeed become a household name in Ghana. While Ghanaian women were once reluctant to dress themselves in locally produced fabrics, ATL has achieved a reputation for quality cloth, captivating designs, and superb colors. As cloth seller Maame Mansah noted: “Today, ATL has become beautiful.” Her niece Pearl Ofosu added that imported Dutch wax has become so expensive that “everybody is buying Akosombo cloth. Moreover, young women [like Ofosu] wear Akosombo fabrics for church and funerals.” ATL is doing good business producing cloth designed for special occasions, such as engagement ceremonies, weddings, outdoornings, funerals, political events, and anniversaries, including President Obama’s 2009 visit to Ghana and the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana in 2011 (fig. 3.11).

Accounts of ATL’s success do not, however, tell the full story. In numerous interviews with former ATL workers a different tale emerged. Several times in the company’s history, employees organized in the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) challenged ATL labor policies. In 1976, according to John Gyaise,
a skilled worker in the boiler room, workers shut down the factory because they rejected the salary of the new contract agreement. After two weeks, all workers had to re-apply for their positions; those who refused to sign the contract were sacked. Ten years later, a second strike followed with a similar outcome. In January of 1999, ATL workers walked out following a breakdown in negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement. Six weeks later, when the strikers became “hungry,” management brought most of them back but dismissed 164 workers, including the entire union leadership. In July another strike followed; about 298 workers were fired, as former union secretary George Kpodotsi recalled. By 2008 these conflicts had not healed but had created a culture of silence with little tolerance for complaints. Gyaise commented: “You cannot talk, because when you talk, you will be sacked.”

These days, ATL faces another crisis due to the forces of globalization and market liberalization. Cheap Chinese imports with designs copied from ATL and other Ghanaian textile manufacturers like CVR increasingly find customers in Ghana. As a result of this new competition, ATL has been forced to lay off employees and reduce its production. At the gala dinner for ATL’s fortieth anniversary, Auntie Afia Ampene, the hostess and producer of the popular Ghana TV show Mmaa Nkommo (Women’s talk), offered the closing remarks. She thanked “our mothers,” the women who had sold ATL products. Then she added to big applause, “We continue to boycott any imitation fabrics,” and she observed, “Ghanaians living abroad” now proudly bring “ATL fabrics to their parents instead of buying cloth abroad.”