AFRICAN EXPRESSIVE CULTURES
Patrick McNaughton, general editor
Associate editors
Catherine M. Cole
Barbara G. Hoffman
Eileen Julien
Kassim Kone
D. A. Masolo
Elisha P. Renne
Z. S. Strother

EDITED BY JEAN ALLMAN

Fashioning Africa
Power and the Politics of Dress

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bloomington and Indianapolis
10 Fashionable Traditions: The Globalization of an African Textile

Victoria L. Rovine

[Africa] is children singing and the crazy rhythm of funerals, the tempo of rites of passage, the cry of wild animals and the gaze of women whose silhouettes, painted by their boubous and kantas, stand out gracefully on the line of the horizon.

—Stéphane Guibourgé, *African Style*

As the Costume Institute show illustrates, men from the Dinka tribe of Sudan restrict their apparel to corsets elaborately beaded to convey status, affiliation, wealth and, if photographs are any guide, their considerable beauty. Similarly, women of the Parisian haute couture tribe wear beaded corsets from the ateliers of John Galliano or Mr. Gaultier to convey status, affiliation and all the rest.

—description of *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed*, an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, 2001

Last season I produced a collection called "Tribal Traditionalism." ... For the first time in my life, I felt ready to express my cultural and ancestral spirituality in a collection. I allowed the spirit and colours of Africa to flow through everything that I created. At long last I felt the confidence to do this without feeling stereotyped.

—Ozwald Boateng, Ghanaian designer, 2002

Garments, unlike other commodities, are very literally embodied; when they travel, they serve as shorthand referents to the people and cultures with whom they originated. They offer a medium by which to declare local identities and a means of "trying on" new identities. Africa is a powerful force in contemporary fashion markets, providing a source of both identity and inspiration for fashion designers around the world. In New York City, Paris, and other centers of Western fashion, designers have long been inspired by, borrowed from, and appropriated African forms. African garments may evoke a romanticized vision of an eternal, picturesque Africa (*boubou* and *kanga*-clad women silhouetted on the horizon) or, alternatively, they may lend the Western consumer a tinge of Africa's exoticism (the shared tribal quality of the Dinka men and the Parisian fashion devotees). Simultaneously, African designers are striving to find a place in the global fashion marketplace alongside their Western counterparts. Several have gained interna-
tional renown, despite the economic and infrastructural challenges many African designers face. Ironically, those who do gain international exposure often find themselves stereotyped, expected to create recognizably African designs. Those who do use African materials and styles must confront the connotations those forms have acquired outside Africa. The garments that have emerged out of Africa's engagement with fashion are extraordinarily varied, reflecting the many Africas that exist both in reality and in the imaginations of designers.

My exploration of Africa's role in international clothing design and marketing centers on two key concepts whose close ties are infrequently acknowledged: fashion and tradition. A single African textile, closely associated with traditional cultures in its place of origin, serves as a guide through the diverse markets and styles in which tradition and fashion intermingle. The travels of this textile, variously called bogolan, bogolanfini, or mudcloth, offer an opportunity to explore the implications of adaptations, revivals, and transformations of a distinctively African form via fashion. Here, my focus is on the role of African designers and African markets in this textile's transformations. I will describe how the careers and the work of two designers, Chris Seydou and Alou Traoré, draw together bogolan's associations with longstanding traditions and its potential use in innovative fashion design. I will close with a brief discussion of the changing meanings of the cloth as it has been adapted to contemporary markets in the United States. I begin with an exploration of the often strained relationship between fashion and tradition.

The Focus on the Traditional

As I will describe, forms associated with traditional cultures are a key aspect of African designers' practice, either as markers of personal identity or as symbols of the past against which to measure their innovations. Many Western designers also make use of traditional African styles, often emphasizing the appeal of these forms' distance from the familiar. Two quotations from popular sources, separated by seventy years, indicate the longevity of this Western focus on traditional African attire. Both authors use garments as part of their evocation of Africa as picturesque and distant, drawing attention to those garments' "exoticism" by citing unfamiliar names:

Two hundred natives from the farthest provinces give the whole of the Section [the French West Africa section at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris] a touch of simple exoticism that draws ... the crowd. The white boubous of the Senegalese, the blue coats of the Moors, and the black robes of the Peulhs, next to the raphia skirts of the natives of the Ivory Coast.5

Native notions such as single-shoulder togas, asymmetrical hemlines, tunics, and draped, fluid clothing are common denominators on the modern fashion landscape. Collections in New York and Europe are laced with Masai beadwork, spice drenched sarongs, flowing caftans, and vibrant kente cloth from Ghana.7

While boubous, robes, raphia skirts, beadwork, and caftans fascinate Western observers, and may provide inspiration for Western fashion, in popular parlance

190 Victoria L. Rovine
they are not fashion in their own right. Instead, they are described by terms such as “costume,” “dress,” and “garb,” words often modified by the overarching adjectives “traditional,” “native,” “indigenous,” and “authentic.” None of these terms carry implications of change over time, for traditional practices are generally conceived of as being changed rather than creating change. They are associated with local cultures rather than international markets, with the past rather than the future. Craik summarizes this distancing of fashion from non-Western cultures: “Symptomatically, the term fashion is rarely used in reference to non-Western cultures. The two are defined in opposition to each other: western dress is fashion because it changes regularly; is superficial and mundane, and projects individual identity; non-western dress is costume because it is unchanging, encodes deep meanings, and projects group identity and membership.”

I use the term “traditional” in my discussion of bogolan’s role in contemporary fashion despite its connotations of timelessness and communal identity, for the concept is crucial to the cloth’s success in both local and global contexts. Traditions—the practices, objects, and beliefs that are marked off as particularly central to a culture’s essence—are generally treated as self-evident and unchanging. Yet the designation of particular aspects of culture as traditional may be strategic; traditions may be employed to reinforce local identities during a time of change, or they may be used by cultural insiders to market their products to outsiders. Hobsbawm and Ranger’s seminal edited volume, The Invention of Tradition, addressed the production of traditions in European, Asian, and African contexts. In his introduction, Hobsbawm distinguishes between “custom” and “tradition,” a distinction that informs my own use of the latter term. Traditions, he notes, are characterized by an imagined invariance: “The past, real or invented, to which they refer imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices.” Custom, which may be still more deeply rooted in history, is more explicitly changeable: “It does not preclude innovation and change up to a point. . . . What it does is to give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent.” Bogolan exists in both realms, simultaneously tradition and custom, although my research has focused on the impact of the cloth’s designation as traditional.

Like all cultural practices, the use of bogolan emerges out of a specific history of development and change; it is far from timeless and static. Even in apparently conservative contexts, such as the production of bogolan tunics as ritual protection for hunters (described below), artists are innovative and styles change. My discussion of bogolan centers on the ways in which this textile’s designation as traditional has propelled it into new forms and new markets. My focus is on the artists, merchants, and consumers who are drawn to bogolan’s special status as traditional, rather than on the primarily rural villagers for whom the cloth embodies custom—part of the changing life of the community. In none of its incarnations is bogolan unchanging; rural and urban artists have both innovated to suit changing markets. In the pages that follow, I will discuss the diverse incarnations of bogolan clothing, describing its continuing life as rural custom, as well as its urban, international adaptations, which are predicated on bogolan’s status as an emblem of indigenous, “traditional” Malian culture. Bogolan’s story demonstrates that tradition is far
from static and eternal; it emerges out of specific contexts and, as in the case of bogolan, may serve as an engine for change.

Despite the complex interplay of history, politics, economics, and expectation that informs the designation of some practices as traditional, in common parlance tradition is extracted from these contexts and treated as a marker of a pure, unchanging past. Clothing, a highly visible marker of cultural identity, provides one illustration of this conception of tradition. Numerous discussions of African attire have lamented the loss of that continent's traditional, authentic forms, treating change as a symptom of loss rather than of creative adaptation. Angela Fisher's commentary in her popular book *Africa Adorned* typifies this stance: "During seven years of traveling in Africa to research this book, I was constantly aware that many traditions—including some outstanding styles of jewelry and dress—were rapidly becoming rarer or had already disappeared... That this should be so is tragic but understandable." In contrast, Fisher admires the few peoples whose "cultural and moral framework is still strong, who guard their traditional beliefs." 12 The implication of such declarations, common in rhetoric surrounding non-Western cultures, is that the adaptation of Western-style garb constitutes a loss, a breach in the vigilance of "traditional" peoples. Tomlinson described the expectation that African and other non-Western ("Third World") cultures should remain untouched by global influences: "It is as though the Third World is attributed with a special need and even a special responsibility to resist the enticements of an ersatz commodified culture." 13 While the impact of global commodity culture might be characterized as positive or negative, depending upon the specific circumstances and on one's perspective, the notion that "traditional" cultures should remain outside the reach of global currents denies their awareness of and involvement in contemporary international culture. As my discussion of bogolan's adaptations to fashion demonstrates, tradition's orientation toward the past does not preclude its active engagement with global influences in the present.

While tradition is characterized as static, fashion is defined by energetic change: "Fashion comes from Paris, and one of its greatest characteristics is that it changes. No sooner is something 'in fashion' than it is 'out of fashion' again." 14 The shifts in hemlines or color combinations that mark fashion's changing seasons epitomize rejection of the past in an unending search for the new, most vividly illustrated by haute couture design, where practitioners endeavor twice yearly to set new trends. 15 Styles change dramatically, in some instances marked by each season's "ethnic" influence, or influences, of choice. In one of many French publications aimed at defining trends for the fashion industry, 1989–90 is heralded as a year of many influences: "a year of all styles, all blends, all combinations. From the East to the West, from the Arctic to the Antarctic, from exoticism to folklore, from the past reassembled into the 1980s." 16 Similarly, in 2002 *Style.com*, a website sponsored by *Vogue* and *W* magazines, identified global influence as a prominent element of the season's trends: "Like a faint whiff of patchouli, the hippie spirit lingered over Fall's collections, as designers made boho-inspired stops in Africa, Scandinavia, South America and the Tyrol." 17 Such global sampling epitomizes the fashion industry's reputation as a constantly shifting and apparently random medley of styles.
Little wonder, then, that the themes of this essay—“fashion” and “tradition”—seldom share the same discursive space. The conceptual distance between the two concepts has led, in some cases, to assertions that societies characterized as traditional did not know fashion until they encountered Western practices. In fact, forms identified with (African) tradition and those associated with (Western) fashion may interact, blend, and elucidate each other as part of the negotiations by which contemporary identities are declared. Just as Western designers have long drawn inspiration from African forms, so too have African designers been influenced by Western styles, techniques, and materials. While Western forms may be borrowed or copied, more frequently they are transformed, shaped to suit the needs and desires of new markets. Lamine Kouyaté, a Malian-born designer whose brand Xuly-Bêt has gained international renown, vividly described the creative adaptation of Western garments—both garments themselves and their depictions—to African markets: “At home, all the products come from foreign places. They’re imported from everywhere, made for a different world with another culture in mind. A sweater arrives in one of the hottest moments of the year. So you cut the sleeves off to make it cooler. Or a woman will get a magazine with a photo of a Chanel suit, and she’ll ask a tailor to make it out of African fabric. It completely redirects the look.” Garments and styles are thus translated and transformed as they move between continents, shaped by the needs and desires of consumers.

The interplay between indigenous and global influences in the realm of fashion is further complicated by the multidirectional movement of designers and their work in international markets. Kouyaté, whose brand is based in Paris, incorporated the sweaters he observed in his youth into his haute couture fashion designs—his cut and stitched jeans, sweaters, and shirts were acclaimed in Paris and New York. This work, aimed at European markets, emerged out of Kouyaté’s experiences of distinctly local African attire, but it is surely not “traditional,” nor is it “Western.” This instance dramatically demonstrates the mobility of forms, ideas, and people which makes simple definitions of identity impossible. Even the “African fabric” of Kouyaté’s Malian youth, which he saw local tailors transform into Chanel-style suits, was likely based on European precedents (the factory cloth produced in England or Holland for the African trade) or, equally likely, was actually imported from Europe or Asia. The “globalization” of this essay’s title thus refers to several phenomena: the movement of African designers into global markets, the impact of Western designers on African markets, and the movement of garments, images, and ideas between cultures and markets. Using a single African textile, closely associated with tradition both in its place of origin and abroad, I will explore the diverse outcomes of interactions between fashion and tradition.

Fashioning Meanings through Bogolan

Bogolan is in fact a mosaic of fantasy and reality. Bogolan is a technique that our ancestors have left us.

—Kandiora Cobibaly, Malian artist and designer

*Fashionable Traditions* 193
I am a contemporary designer who knows what I can do technically and how to do it. Bogolan can simply be a cultural base for my work.

—Chris Seydou, Malian designer

When Mary McFadden knocks off mudcloth—as she did last spring—you can assume it’s purely because she likes the way it looks.

—Patricia McLaughlin, “Style with Substance”

The Malian textile variously called bogolan, bogolanfini, and mudcloth vividly illustrates the intersecting worlds of tradition and fashion. Its connotations are, as the above quotations demonstrate, as varied as its names. The realms of fashion and tradition interact through bogolan; overlapping, intersecting, and drawing on each other, each realm finds in the other a source of both inspiration and validation. This textile is closely associated with indigenous Malian attire, and with ritual practices among members of the Bamana ethnic group. Its association with tradition has propelled bogolan onto international fashion markets and motivated its transformation into distinctly contemporary forms. Bogolan’s position at the confluence of fashion and tradition demonstrates the malleability and the modernity of textiles and garments associated with indigenous cultures. Contemporary bogolan has been adapted to diverse contexts, traversing conceptual categories and cultural divides. What follows is a brief description of the cloth’s contemporary manifestations, all of which co-exist and cross-pollinate.

In rural contexts, bogolan tunics are worn by hunters to provide protection from the dangerous spirit forces of the wilderness. Young girls in villages and small towns also wear bogolan, which they wrap around their waists as spiritual protection during the liminal periods following their initiations into womanhood, marriage, and childbirth. In these contexts, bogolan is closely associated with Bamana culture and history. These wraps and tunics are made of cotton that is woven in strips and stitched together to create larger cloths. The cloth is decorated by women, who use local materials and a labor-intensive technique to apply bogolan’s distinctive geometric patterns. These patterns carry specific symbolic meanings, closely tied to Bamana mythology and history. Bogolan’s functions and its forms have been passed down over the course of generations as part of local custom. As noted above, bogolan’s patterns and styles have changed over the course of its history. In but one instance of such change, one rural bogolan artist described some of the patterns she uses as “Bamana” and others as “Mali”; the former patterns are associated with pre-independence (1960) styles and the latter patterns were developed after 1960.

Since at least the 1980s, bogolan has thrived in several other markets, most prominently in urban settings, where it has undergone dramatic changes in style and function. Tourists at hotels, restaurants, and bustling shops in Mali’s capital, Bamako, encounter the same cloth, sold in wrapper-sized pieces or cut and sewn into a variety of products, including pillows, vests, hats, and bags. This version of bogolan is also handmade; like the rural cloth it is made of strip-woven fabric and
each cloth is individually painted. However, the abstract designs are applied to the cloth using time-saving techniques, such as stenciling, and the much-simplified patterns do not have symbolic meanings. The bogolan found in these contexts was made for sale to tourists rather than for ritual use.

Bogolan also appears in museums and art galleries in Bamako, where visitors may find paintings made by local artists who learned bogolan techniques at the country's only art school. Artists use techniques of their own invention, such as collage and splattering of pigments, to depict figures, landscapes, and abstractions. They use either industrially produced canvas or strip-woven cloth as their support. Most of these artists are men, marking a dramatic shift in gender from the exclusively female production of bogolan in its rural contexts. They adapt the cloth to their work because it is a part of their heritage, and because they recognize that some collectors will be drawn to the cloth's associations with traditional practices.

Finally, in the streets of African, European, and North American cities and towns, bogolan is worn in the form of garments in a wide range of styles. In the United States, bogolan's patterns are reproduced on t-shirts, skirts, jogging suits, and countless other garments. These versions of bogolan, which are more accurately called "bogolan-style" rather than "bogolan," are as likely to be mass-produced in facto-
ries as made by hand. Bogolan clothing may be worn as a signal of national or ethnic identity, an expression of a generalized identification with African heritage, or an evocation of the "exotic."

I have discussed elsewhere bogolan’s adaptations to tourist markets and to studio art.27 Here, my focus is on the cloth’s sartorial adaptations, in which bogolan attains its greatest stylistic variety and its highest visibility. In a Bamako market in 1994, for example, I encountered a hunter clad in a protective bogolan tunic standing beside a French resident of the city wearing a bogolan robe stenciled with dancing figures and patterns borrowed from factory-printed cloth.28 The hunter’s garment was made according to generations of Bamana practice; the expatriate’s was of a type invented only three years earlier.29 The former was deeply rooted in Bamana custom; the latter was aimed at a contemporary, international market for changing fashions. Bogolan garments in varied styles also appear in fashion shows, tourist markets, nightclubs, and museum displays, as well as in small towns and villages. From the women’s wraps and hunters’ tunics of bogolan’s rural incarnations to boubous and baseball caps, the creators of bogolan and bogolan-style garments traverse, meld, or disregard the divide between tradition and fashion.

Despite the immense variety of bogolan’s contemporary forms, a shared characteristic links all of its incarnations: from hunters’ tunics to miniskirts, bogolan carries associations with traditional cultures and practices. In his discussion of Native American basketry, Cohodas measures his subjects’ associations with "authentic tradition" by assessing "the degree to which Native American objects and practices could operate as metonyms for the pre-modern, constructing a purified, ostensibly precontact past."30 The bogolan worn by a Bamana hunter exemplifies the cloth’s associations with traditional Malian culture, for it serves as a metonym for many aspects of Mali’s precolonial and pre-Muslim past. Bogolan hunters’ tunics, as well as the bogolan wrappers worn by girls following initiation, make reference to religious, historical, technological, and aesthetic aspects of indigenous Malian culture.

Bogolan serves ritual functions that are deeply rooted in Bamana religious beliefs, protecting its wearers against the malevolent forces that may be directed against them through sorcery. That bogolan is associated with the mythic heroism of hunters and the strictly gendered initiation process also makes it an effective symbol of indigenous culture. The symbolic nature of the cloth’s motifs further enhances bogolan’s efficacy as a symbol of Malian—specifically Bamana—history and mythology. The precise meanings of the motifs are, in this instance, relatively unimportant, for they serve as generalized references to indigenous knowledge and practices.

Bogolan is also distinctly local—the cloth is uniquely Malian, the only one of Mali’s many indigenous textiles that is made nowhere else. The Bamana ethnic group is the one most closely associated with bogolan.31 Significantly, bogolan production is historically rooted in the Beledougou, a region north of Bamako that is associated with adherence to Bamana customs, including religious practices that predate Islam (often characterized as "animist") and with long resistance to the French colonial forces in the late nineteenth century.32 Bogolan’s strong connections to a particular place (Mali) and population (the Bamana ethnic group) place
it within a specific narrative that may enhance the cloth's associations with traditional cultures as it travels into new markets.

Other aspects of bogolan's rural manifestations augment its capacity to serve as a symbol of tradition. Key among the cloth's attributes are the labor-intensive technique by which it is made and the division of labor according to gender and age in its production. In his discussion of the Western fascination with Asian carpets, Spooner described how information about “traditional” production practices is central to the marketing of the carpets: “the fact of their being hand-made became a significant characteristic and . . . the survival of traditional relations of production became an additional factor [in their success on the international art market].”33 That bogolan is made in accordance with past practices, the skills required to create the cloth handed down over the course of generations from elderly women to girls and young women, similarly enhances its identity as a traditional art form. In these numerous attributes—production, iconography, ritual functions, geographic specificity—bogolan garments made for use by hunters and young women epitomize those aspects of Malian culture that are associated with tradition.

Bogolan jackets, vests, miniskirts, baseball caps, and robes emerge out of the codification of tradition, a codification that is self-conscious, contemporary in its conception, tied to specific elements of the cloth's appearance, and international in its orientation. As bogolan is adapted to contemporary international markets, its handmade quality and information about its production and its ritual functions remain, to varied degrees, attached to the cloth. As I will describe, its connections to tradition are preserved, though they may become increasingly tenuous as bogolan clothing travels far from its origins.

In Mali today, bogolan clothing is worn by increasing numbers of young people, particularly in the country's cosmopolitan capital. Some of the artists and designers who have created new forms of bogolan clothing seek to re-create or update Malian traditions, deliberately basing their work on clothing and textile styles associated with indigenous Malian culture. Other creators of bogolan clothing view their work as a project of modernization, adapting bogolan's patterns and dyeing techniques to garments aimed at a contemporary international market.

Alou Traoré and Chris Seydou: Bogolan's New Clothes

Two creators of bogolan clothing, one based in Bamako's local markets and the other in international haute couture design, exemplify the diverse sartorial manifestations of this Malian textile. While the two men differ in their motivations for making use of bogolan, their methods of working with the cloth, and the styles of the garments they create, Chris Seydou and Alou Traoré share an interest in the cloth's identity as a traditional art form. As men participating in an art customarily practiced by women, they illustrate the dramatic shift in the gender profile of bogolan producers in recent years.34 The two are among many Malians who have turned to bogolan in the past two decades in an effort to create clothing that is at once contemporary and distinctly Malian. The following descriptions of their careers and their work illustrate the many factors, both local and international, that
have shaped their contributions to Malian and international fashion design as well as their dedication to bogolan as a symbol of both tradition and contemporaneity.

Alou Traoré’s work exemplifies the use of bogolan to create clothing that emerges out of past practices, updating indigenous forms to create new styles. His contribution to contemporary Malian fashion lies in a combination of technical precision and an ability to recognize the modernity of garments with deep local roots. His innovations are subtle, for his goal was to reshape rather than to revolutionize preexisting clothing. From 1991 until 2000, when he took a full-time teaching job, Traoré made bogolan boubous and wrapper-sized cloths adorned with elaborate stenciled patterns. In addition to occasional commissions from Malian and expatriate clients, Traoré’s robes and wrappers were sold at a stall in one of Bamako’s large markets. He designed his stencils, which were cut from cardboard or sheets of plastic, so that they could be used in a wide range of combinations to create richly layered patterns, distinctly different from both the locally produced bogolan and the factory-printed cloth that was sold alongside his creations.

Traoré’s stenciled patterns include a wide range of abstract forms, none of which are based on the designs that appear on cloth used for ritual purposes. He also incorporates figurative motifs. His abstract designs are inspired by the vibrant factory-printed textiles that abound in Bamako’s streets and markets, by flowers and leaves, and by the geometric styles of the bogolan cloths he encountered. The figurative stencils depict popular motifs from tourist art and fine art markets, including *ci wara* figures, cowrie shells, and masked dancers. These are images that serve as emblems of indigenous Malian culture in the tourist art trade and in official contexts, such as on the sides of public buildings and in official logos.

Along with his innovative designs, Traoré also set his work apart from both precedents and his contemporaries through his use of his garments’ surfaces. Boubous are customarily adorned with embroidered patterns that are focused around the garment’s yoke. Since the advent of widely available industrial textiles in the late nineteenth century, boubous have been made of printed textiles, often with machine-stitched embroidery patterns. Traoré was not the first artist to bring bogolan to the creation of boubous, but his work is distinctly innovative, for it breaks free of long-standing precedent. Traoré reconceptualized the garment, covering the entire surface with intricate patterns and occasional figurative elements constructed out of layered, interlocking stencils.

In an effort to streamline his work, Traoré offered potential clients a model book, containing more than twenty photographs illustrating combinations of stenciled motifs, from which to commission boubous and cloths. Traoré’s wife and other family members then duplicated the pieces in the photographs, making changes or adding newly designed motifs under Traoré’s direction. This method broadly resembles the apprenticeship structure used in rural contexts, but its intention was to speed production rather than to train future generations.

Like many producers of bogolan in Bamako, Traoré took up bogolan production as an adult, though he had some experience with the technique as a child. Traoré is from San, a city north of Bamako renowned as a source of inexpensive, quickly produced bogolan aimed primarily at the tourist art market in Bamako. Traoré
trained as a primary school teacher, and he taught briefly in Bamako. He lost his job in 1991 during the cuts in governmental employment following the popular overthrow of President Moussa Traoré in March of that year. Traoré learned basic bogolan-making skills as a child in San, where many of his friends and acquaintances made bogolan to be sold in Bamako’s tourist art markets: “I am not an artist by training but since I was born in a city where people make bogolan, when I found myself unemployed I began to make bogolan.” Bogolan’s popularity in the tourist art trade and its growing visibility in international markets (a topic addressed below) increased its appeal as a means of earning at least a partial living.

Traoré’s identity (as a man making bogolan), artistic practice (using stencils instead of applying bogolan pigments by hand), motivation (to earn money in urban markets), and work style (creating his own abstract and figurative motifs) all clearly separate his work from bogolan made according to past practices. Yet the core identity of the garments he produces is distinctly local and indigenous: he makes primarily boubous, wrapper-sized cloths, and drawstring pants, all clothing typical...
of Malian, and West African, style. By combining two forms associated with traditional attire, one a garment and the other a textile-dyeing technique, Traoré creates garments that defy neat categorization—his work is an updating of tradition that grows out of his contemporary, urban milieu.

Although Traoré and other artists who have used bogolan to create distinctly Malian garments have found a very limited market for their work outside Mali, the ornately adorned garments have wide visibility abroad. Bogolan clothing is popular among musicians and other entertainers, worn on stage and in music videos or pictured on compact disc covers. Contemporary musicians who have worn bogolan clothing on stage or in videos include Dijeneba Seck, Habib Koita, and Toumani Diabaté, all of whom are major stars in Mali and increasingly visible in Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere. Mali’s most prominent film directors also make use of this style of bogolan attire in costume and set designs. Thus garments that are based on forms associated with tradition have gained visibility through contemporary, global media. Bogolan-dyed boubous by Traoré and other artists, whether sold in Bamako’s markets or worn on stage in New York, defy divisions between local and global, tradition and modernity.

Though he worked in a completely different style, Chris Seydou also used bogolan to create distinctly contemporary fashion. Seydou (1949–94) was Mali’s most famous fashion designer; he was, in fact, among a select group of African designers to gain an international reputation. He worked both inside and outside of Africa, and his designs reflect his efforts to draw together forms associated with both local tradition and international haute couture. I will dwell at some length on Seydou’s work and his career because of his seminal role in contemporary African fashion design and because his work draws on both the tension and the energy produced by the intersection of forms characterized as traditional and those associated with Western fashion. His career also illustrates the impact of the contemporary globalización of both fashion and fashion designers.

Chris Seydou worked and showed his designs with internationally renowned designers, most notably Paco Rabanne and Yves Saint-Laurent. He made a place for himself in the competitive Parisian fashion industry, and was among the first to promote African fashion designers on the international market. Along with Alphadi and Kofi Ansah he founded the Fédération Africaine de Prêt à Porter (African federation of ready-to-wear designers). After Seydou’s death in 1994, obituaries appeared in French as well as Malian and Ivorian newspapers and magazines. The designer’s importance as an ambassador of Malian culture was celebrated, as was his crucial role in bogolan’s revival: “Through his creations, Mali became better known throughout the world for its cultural treasures, all the way to America where black Americans today make bogolan into a source of cultural identity.”

Unlike Traoré and other artists whose innovations are focused on skillfully combining bogolan techniques with local garments, Seydou’s work approaches bogolan from the perspective of international fashion, seeking to adapt the cloth to garments popular in global markets. Seydou’s skills lay in the design of tailored garments rather than in the use of bogolan pigments. In fact, Seydou himself never
made bogolan; instead, he purchased it in markets or commissioned it from artists. Far from producing garments associated with indigenous culture, such as boubous, Seydou was best known for his use of bogolan to create distinctively Western-style garments. He tailored the cloth into tight-fitting miniskirts, motorcycle jackets, and bustiers, using shapes and techniques that emerged out of his haute couture training. In a description of the “Chris Seydou phenomenon,” one journalist noted several of his distinctive garments: “very sophisticated little camisole blouses which are very low-cut, shoulder-straps, strapless bras; sewn ensembles cut at the waist, very tight, with pompons everywhere; short dresses.”5 All of these garments are clearly more closely associated with international fashion than with Malian, or African, precedents.

Seydou’s professional identity, indeed his very name, emerged out of a deep engagement with international fashion. Chris Seydou was born Seydou Nourou Doumbia in Kati, a small town centered on a military base forty kilometers north of Bamako. Because Seydou’s mother worked as an embroiderer, he was from an early age familiar with the tools of the clothing trade. At fifteen, he left school to pursue his interest in fashion, beginning as an apprentice to a local tailor. In 1969 he relocated to Ouagadougou and the following year he moved to Abidjan. Beginning in 1972, Seydou spent seven years in Paris, where he studied European couture. When he embarked on a career in fashion, he changed his name to Chris Seydou in homage to Christian Dior, whose work he admired and studied. Seydou’s

*Fashionable Traditions* 201
designs were worn by celebrities and luminaries including Bianca Jagger, Princess Beatrice of the Netherlands, and Madame Mobutu, wife of the infamous president of Zaire. In 1990, much to the surprise of many Milians, Seydou returned to his home country. He opened a boutique and workshop in Bamako’s chic Quartier du Fleuve district in order to work “the authors, the origins” of “the real African traditions.” Tradition was an attribute of such value for Seydou that it drew him back to Mali from the fashion centers of Abidjan and Paris, cities with large markets and cutting-edge fashion. Only in Mali did he have access to the weavers and dyers who were the sources of his raw materials. Much of his attention was focused on bogolan, which he had used for years and which he felt was at risk of deteriorating. In order to preserve this symbol of Mali’s traditional cultures, Seydou strove to make bogolan relevant to contemporary, international clothing styles. Seydou cited a single event as the catalyst for his appreciation of bogolan as a traditional art form and his recognition of the cloth’s potential relevance to his fashion design. On returning to Paris after a visit home in 1973 or 1974, he found in his suitcase several pieces of bogolan he had received as gifts. Though he was familiar with bogolan from his childhood in Kati, he associated it with hunters, dances, and ritual rather than with his own interest in fashion. But when he encountered bogolan in Paris, the familiar cloth was transformed into a memento: a reminder of the place and the people of home. Like the foreigners who purchase bogolan in the tourist art market, at a hotel or restaurant souvenir stand, Seydou used bogolan to embody his memories of Mali once out of the country. He began showing his bogolan designs in 1975–76, while still living in Paris. During his years abroad Seydou found himself classified as an African designer rather than simply a designer. He was determined to place himself within the same international arena as other designers he worked with in Paris. Simultaneously, he asserted his Malian identity through his choice of fabrics, creating a bricolage intended to please a wide variety of clients, African and European. Seydou spoke of struggling to negotiate the dueling expectations he faced, with African clients seeking him out to lend them “Western style” and Western clients drawn to his “African sensibility.” While many other artists and designers have focused their attention on preserving bogolan’s “traditional” techniques and styles, Seydou’s work seems to remove any doubt of bogolan’s relevance to contemporary pursuits. His bogolan clothing was one line of designs among many, and was not singled out to be marketed as the revival of a traditional textile. Editing, modifying, or discarding the techniques and the material that characterize bogolan are central to his design practice. One of Seydou’s modifications of the cloth addressed the density of its designs, which he altered to suit his use of bogolan as a medium for tailored garments. The number and variety of distinct motifs on a single piece of cloth makes cutting and assembling a garment extremely difficult, for no two portions of the cloth are identical. According to Seydou, this cloth is “too full”; “there are ten designs in the same piece—one can make ten maquettes from a single one [a single cloth].” Seydou responded to his difficulties in utilizing the cloth available to him by creating his
own versions of bogolan, isolating a single pattern in a process he referred to as “decoding” the cloth. The resultant cloths are easier to cut and assemble as his designs require. Because he did not himself make bogolan, Seydou commissioned artists to produce the cloth according to his designs.

Seydou’s reluctance to utilize the cloth in its original form, with its symbolic motifs, was also a reflection of his respect for the cloth’s significance in rural contexts, where it is imbued with great protective power. While he himself did not profess the same beliefs, or comprehend the specific meanings of the symbols, he respected bogolan’s symbolic and ritual functions. This respect made him hesitant to cut the cloth when he first started using it: “For me it was symbolic. For me,
I didn’t want to cut bogolan early on—it was difficult to put my scissors to it.”

The same associations with indigenous Malian culture that drew Seydou to bogolan also shaped his method of working with the cloth.

In all of its forms, Seydou preserved bogolan’s Malian identity. His efforts extended into the realm of industrially produced cloth, with his 1990 designs for the Industrie Textile du Mali (ITEMA), a Malian textile producer. He designed a cloth based on bogolan’s patterns, which ITEMA printed in both brown and blue. Though the creation of industrially produced bogolan may initially appear to contradict Seydou’s efforts to support bogolan producers and enhance bogolan’s success in world markets, in fact his intention was to secure the patterns for a Malian textile company so that at least the cloth would bear a “Made in Mali” label. Other textile companies were already making bogolan-style cloth, and the patterns were being copied, transferred, and recycled in every conceivable form, from bedsheets to dinnerware. Seydou spoke of his consternation at viewing bogolan-patterned industrial cloth in the window of the Parisian furniture and housewares store RocheBobois (part of a large chain). The fabric was labeled “tissu Mexico” or “Mexico fabric.”

The diffusion of bogolan, which continues today, was a matter of concern for Seydou and occupies the attention of other Malians seeking to support the production of bogolan as a source of income and recognition for their compatriots. Ironically, the same associations with traditional Malian culture that have made bogolan the object of Malian designers’ attention have also lent the cloth its “exotic” appeal abroad, where it has become a part of the long history of Western fashion designers’ adaptation of non-Western forms.

African Forms and Western Designers

There is a wide barrier between the primitive savage of the Belgian Congo and the modern, well-dressed woman of Fifth Avenue. There is a tinge of the paradoxical in the statement that the latter would find in the former an inspiration for her dress.... But facts are often more interesting, and sometimes stranger than fiction. And it is a fact that the modern woman of America has found in the Congo savage a source of inspiration for her dress. Those of an incredulous mind had only to view the beautiful display of women’s apparel in the Fifth Avenue windows of Bonwit, Teller & Co., New York, to be convinced.

—1923 description of women’s sportswear in fabrics inspired by Kuba raphia cloth6

Above all, at a time when Western fashion seems to have reached an impasse on its stony road to the future, traditional African clothing seems to have a point and a purpose, expressing symbolically the culture and the ideals of a society and passing them on to the next generation.

—Suzy Menkes, New York fashion journalist, 1997

Whether grudgingly acknowledged or sincerely admired, African forms have long had an impact on Western fashion design. Fashion offers a vivid illustration
of the multidirectional nature of globalization, with influences moving back and forth between cultures. In his discussion of early European fashion, Braudel cites a sixteenth-century observer’s description of the international sources of a British dandy’s attire: “His Codpeece is in Denamkere, the collar, his Duble and the belly in France, the wing and narrow sleeve in Italy.” Arbiter of Western fashion today have looked much further afield for inspiration, including into the non-Western world.

The appearance of bogolan clothing in U.S. markets illustrates the potency of the cloth’s associative powers. Even as the technique by which it is made, the products into which it is fashioned, and the contexts in which it appears bear no resemblance to its rural, Malian contexts, bogolan clothing outside Mali continues to carry associations with “tradition.” My discussion of bogolan fashion in the United States focuses on the maintenance of this association with tradition, which is most vividly manifested in the information that accompanies bogolan shirts, dresses, jackets, bags, and other items. Clothing catalogues, in which descriptions of garments supplement the information provided by photographs, provide a wealth of insight into the role of tradition in the marketing of bogolan clothing in the United States.

My focus here is not on the occasional use of bogolan by non-Malian haute couture designers, for the cloth appears less frequently in these markets and therefore does not provide as rich an illustration of bogolan’s connotations in Western markets. I will, however, briefly mention two of these adaptations, to demonstrate bogolan’s malleability in the hands of international designers. In 1990, renowned Japanese designer Issey Miyake created draped garments made of textiles whose bold black and white patterns strongly resemble the style of bogolan associated with San Alou Traoré’s childhood home. The designs were likely influenced by Miyake’s visit to Mali in the late 1980s to learn more about the country’s textiles. More recently, American designer Daryl K. created women’s pants made of strip-woven bogolan turned inside out. The designers have not publicly discussed their motivations for using bogolan, and the clothing is not accompanied by information about the cloth that inspired it.

Bogolan and bogolan-style clothing aimed at broader markets in the U.S., often marketed with references to its African origins, offer fascinating comparisons with Malian use of bogolan clothing. A fundamental distinction separates the appearance of bogolan clothing in the United States from its recent Malian adaptations: rather than constructing the local, bogolan in the U.S. is associated with distant, exotic cultures. A great deal of the bogolan clothing sold in American shops, catalogues, and other outlets caters to Western expectations and preconceptions concerning Africa in which the continent’s cultures are conceived of as “traditional,” “authentic,” “primitive,” and “exotic.” Advertisements for bogolan clothing extol the cloth’s handmade production, focusing on the singularity of each item, on the labor-intensive production process, on the exotic locales from which they originate. So important is bogolan’s low-tech production that consumers seeking to purchase bogolan pants and shirts from one catalogue are reassured by the fact that not even the clothing sizes of bogolan garments are uniform (a notion that would likely
cause consumers chagrin if applied to most other articles of clothing): “All items are handmade and no two are exactly alike. Slight variations in color, design, and size from the items pictured in this catalogue are guaranteed and should be considered a part of the unique crafts of Africa.”

This emphasis on singularity is epitomized by one catalogue company’s assertion that the cloth’s production is limited not only to Mali but to a single village. Bogolan’s hand-made production is also emphasized:

The Malian edge of the Sahara. This village is its own planet with its own art and its own quiet. . . . They cut up empty flour sacks and paint them with a mixture of mud and tree sap, painting and washing and painting again. The mud in Mali has its own chestnut pigment; the sap fixes the color to the cloth. No other village has their technique.

Even a company assembling bogolan garments in the U.S. affiliates itself with tradition by providing (erroneous) information on the cloth’s production and by assuring consumers that even garments assembled domestically are pieced by “native” workers: “Authentic mud cloth vests. Very special natural hand-dyed cloth from Mali, Africa. The color that is painted onto the cloth comes from ground rock in the local area. Sewn in the U.S. by a native African women [sic], each is unique.”

Other outlets for the sale of bogolan emphasize African cultural identity, making the wearing of the cloth a personal statement rather than a means of experiencing an aspect of “exotic” cultures. Ebony, in cooperation with the clothing company Spiegel, encouraged African-American readers to “Show your pride in this patchwork cardigan made of authentic African mud cloth, Kente cloth and printed silk.” McCall’s, a major producer of clothing patterns, used bogolan as a sample fabric for its 1995 “Afrocentric Extras” line of hats, shawls, belts, and head-ties. Clothing companies might declare their African-centered identities by offering bogolan fashions in catalogues whose names imply their identification with Africa as a source of cultural identity, such as “Homeland Authentics” and “NU NUBIAN.” Here, bogolan vests, hats, ties, jogging suits, children’s clothing, and myriad other garments are offered to Americans seeking to give their wardrobes a sense of traditional African identity. Whatever its connotations, from exotic to authentic African identity, bogolan’s adaptations to contemporary American fashion rely heavily upon the cloth’s associations with traditional cultures and traditional technologies.

Bogolan clothing’s varied forms in Mali and in the United States point to its versatility and its visual potency, for the cloth retains its distinctive appearance even when stretched into diverse styles and media. Bogolan’s many sartorial manifestations also illustrate the fertile ground that lies at the intersection of fashion and tradition, for in all of its myriad contemporary forms—from Alou Traoré’s stenciled boubous to bogolan-patterned polyester jogging suits featured in an American clothing catalogue—the cloth’s affiliations with “traditional” cultures are never severed. Bogolan is just one of the many African textiles whose adaptation to contemporary global fashion demonstrates the vitality of African clothing and textiles.

206 Victoria L. Rovine
Indeed, contemporary fashion may enhance the relevance of indigenous African forms, extending their symbolic and formal power into entirely new contexts.

Notes

My research for this chapter was made possible by support from a variety of sources. Most recently, a Getty Foundation Curatorial Research Grant enabled me to conduct research on fashion history in Paris and New York City. My initial research in Mali (1992–93) was funded by a Fulbright-IIE Pre-dissertation Fellowship. At the University of Iowa, an International Programs Travel Grant and an Arts and Humanities Initiative Grant funded my work in Mali in 1997, and grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts provided support for my exhibition on contemporary bogolan. I thank Dr. William Blair, who supported my travel to Mali in 2000 in preparation for that exhibition. My thanks also to many friends and colleagues in Mali, too numerous to name, but especially to the Sissoko family of Medina-Coura, Mr. Oumar Konipo, and Mme. Lalla Tangara Touré. Many thanks also to Jean Allman, for conceiving of and organizing this volume.

4. A boubou is a large, minimally tailored robe worn by men and women in many parts of West Africa. Similar garments, assigned different names, are worn in other parts of Africa. Kangas, associated with the Swahili Coast of East Africa, are rectangular cloths worn in pairs by women. Kangas are typically decorated with bold patterns and often with a printed proverb.
5. The terms “tradition” and “traditional” will be used here to refer to practices and objects that look primarily to the past for inspiration.
7. Francine Parnes, “Out of Africa, onto the Runways: Symbolism of Native Costumes Is Part of Universal Appeal,” South Coast Today, June 9, 1997, n.p. Kente, strip-woven cloth adorned with elaborate, brightly colored patterns, has long been familiar to students of African textiles. Unlike bogolan, which in its rural, “traditional” forms is associated with initiatory contexts and ritual protection, kente is associated with royalty and social status in the kingdoms of the Akan (most notably the Ashanti) in Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire. For a detailed analysis of kente’s production and its uses as a symbol of identity both in Ghana and in the United States, see A. Boatema Boateng, chapter 11 in this volume, and

Fashionable Traditions 207

8. This acceptance of African clothing’s influence without admitting it into the rarified realm of “fashion” has a direct parallel in the treatment of African sculpture in the early twentieth century. African sculpture, too, was a source of inspiration for Western artists long before it was admitted into the canon of world art.


11. Nakunte Diarra, a well-known bogolan artist, offers but one example of such innovation. A hunter’s tunic in the collection of the University of Iowa Museum of Art incorporates a combination of patterns created by Diarra specifically for the commissioner of the tunic, an American resident of her town. Michael Annus, personal communication, 1995.


15. I refer here to the regular spring and fall fashion shows at which designers introduce new work.


21. “Moi je suis un créateur contemporain qui connais techniquement ce que je peux faire et comment je peux le faire. Le bogolan peut être simplement une base culturelle.” Chris Seydou, interview by author, Bamako, March 6, 1993.


23. The Bamana or Bambara are the largest of Mali’s many ethnic groups.

24. Specific information on the complex technique by which bogolan is produced


26. The Institut National des Arts has, since the late 1980s, offered courses in bògòlan techniques and symbolism.

27. My book *Bògòlan* discusses many of the artists and merchants who have taken part in the tourist art and studio art markets for bògòlan.

28. I later learned that the bògòlan robe (or boubou) was made by Alou Traoré, an artist whose work is discussed below. The two stood in front of a market stall that sold both local medicinal products (animal parts and herbs used in indigenous healing practices) and bògòlan bedspreads, robes, and shirts by Traoré.


31. The Bamana are not the only ethnic group associated with bògòlan production, but they have been most closely linked to the cloth both in Mali and in non-Malian publications. In Mali today, members of nearly every ethnic group make bògòlan, largely due to the cloth’s marketability.


34. I discuss this gender shift in *Bògòlan*. My research on the subject indicates that the large increase in the number of men engaged in bògòlan production since the late 1980s reflects the growth of markets for the cloth (largely in the tourist trade) and the reduction of the government bureaucracy that had provided employment for many educated young men.

35. Ci wara figures, carved wooden representations of antelope, are worn on the heads of male dancers at agricultural festivities in some Bamana regions. The sculptures have become prominent in tourist markets in Mali and neighboring countries.

36. For example, the ci wara appears on the façade of the national art school, on one of the stamps used to sign official documents, and formerly on the tail fin of the national airline’s planes. In his use of such identifiably Malian motifs,
Traoré reflects the broad Malian celebration of local cultures evident in fine art as well as in the fashion markets. I discuss in Bogolan the contemporary use of the ci wara and other motifs as symbols of Malian culture.

37. The Groupe Bogolan Kasobane, a group of five artists who work collaboratively, have been using bogolan to adorn boubous and other garments since the mid-1970s. They created matching bogolan ensembles for members of social groups, to be worn at festivities. The other major creators of bogolan boubous are the members of another cooperative group, the Atelier Jamana.

38. Two researchers from the Musée National du Mali wrote a report on bogolan in 1985 in which they noted San's reputation for bogolan production. They described how residents of all ages and both genders took part in bogolan production, which, they feared, "runs the risk of becoming completely commercial."Youssouf Kalilou Berthe and Abdoulaye Konaté, Un mode de teinture: "Le bogolan" (Bamako: Musée National du Mali, 1985), 10.

39. Traoré is an extremely common surname in Mali. Moussa Traoré, who took power in a military coup in 1968, led a repressive single-party regime. The 1991 uprising, led by students and women whose children had been tortured by government agents, spurred an expansion of public discourse—newspapers and political parties exploded in number. The new government, however, faced severe financial challenges.

40. Traoré, interview.

41. Members of the Groupe Bogolan Kasobane have designed costumes for Djibril Kouyaté and Cheikh Oumar Šisoko, including Kouyaté's Tiëfing and Šisoko's Guimba: Un tyran, une époque and Genèse.

42. Kofi Ansah described how the group of three designers determined to inaugurate their new organization with a fashion show, held in Abidjan in the mid-1980s. Interview by author, Accra, Ghana, June 28, 2002.


44. On his return to Mali, Seydou hired a graduate of the Institut National des Arts who had studied bogolan techniques with three members of the Groupe Bogolan Kasobane.


46. Seydou, interview, March 6, 1993.


49. Seydou, interview, March 6, 1993.


52. Ibid.


58. "Thomas Dekker (1572–1632)," in Fernand Braudel, Capitalism and Material