A TEXTILE LANDSCAPE

My first journey to the African continent dates back to 1984, when I was 12. I went on holiday with my family to Togo, to visit my paternal uncle who was building roads there. I visited the Assigamé, the “big market” in Lomé, at a time when wax prints were making the Nana Benz wealthy. I was particularly struck by the colours of the fabrics that everyone was wearing; it seemed “normal” to me that the women of Togo should wear these wax prints, known as “African fabrics”, since they were African!

I returned to Africa four years later, this time to Burkina Faso, and alone: my sixth form college in Montpellier was twinned with the Girls’ National Sixth Form College in Ouagadougou (it has since been renamed the Nelson Mandela Sixth Form College). I started a pen friendship with Gnoutouko, a young Burkinabéé who I met there and at whose home I stayed. In Ouagadougou, too, wax prints were everywhere, and I wanted to bring a sample back to France as a souvenir of my stay. It was after voicing my desire to buy “African fabrics” at the market that I discovered what wax print really is. My host family asked me if I preferred “English” or “Dutch” wax prints, and I pointed out the one that Gnoutouko’s aunt was wearing. Faced with my incomprehension, they told me that what we call “African fabrics” actually come from Europe. In the end, I bought fancy Faso Fani, because I really wanted to take back a local product, even if the design was a copy of a wax print made in a country neighbouring my own. This episode turned out to be a seminal moment, one which was to determine the course of my life. I was in my final year at school, already passionate about ethnology, and my philosophy lessons revealed the sense of the word “otherness” to me. The study of wax prints seemed so obvious to me: it was through this that I would explore otherness, the relationship between European and African cultures.

At university, I met Claude, with whom I have now shared my life for more than 25 years. A Frenchman of Ivory Coast descent, Claude was from Burgundy but wanted to continue his studies in England. I followed him, on the condition that I could choose our destination: it was to be Manchester, the one-time textile powerhouse and the city of English wax prints. Today, this north-western city is famous for its music and football clubs, but it was once the capital of the industrial revolution and textiles, where Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels studied the tremendous changes in 19th-century society. The huge buildings running along the canal, which in the 1990s became home to fashionable clubs and recording studios, were originally the offices and warehouses of rich merchants.

In 1993, Manchester saw the final days of the once-flourishing textile industry and of the international trade which had been its glory for so long. I met the last salesperson to sell Viisco Dutch wax print, just weeks before the office of the import–export United Africa Company (UAC) finally closed, and I started my research at the very last unit producing English wax prints, the ABC factory. At the time, the design office was located right in the city centre, on Sharp Street. Margaret Hickson, surprised that a young French woman should be so enthusiastic about this subject to the point of coming to live in this “rainy country”, enthusiastically provided me with all the codes I needed to decipher the iconographic directory of wax prints.
Examples of the ways in which imported materials and the interaction of artisans and manufacturers enable the development of traditional skills.

Top left: Festive outfits worn by young Mossi women combine the two most symbolic Burkina Faso fabrics: the artisanal gorg-la-pelga weave (literally, "strips with stripes and white") and the industrially produced ilti pende print.

Top right: Rayon kita strips in a weaving workshop in Bassam, Ivory Coast.

Centre: A fabric-dyeing workshop in a residential courtyard in Bamako, Mali. This artisanal activity, known as gara, developed with indigo. Today, the same activity is carried out using vat dyes, with no additional protection, posing serious health risks.

Left: An elegant Bamako lady is dressed for a wedding. She wears a boubou in rich bazin fabric, and a woven strip of cotton and rayon for her headdress.
To gain a better understanding of the importance of this fabric in the history of the production and commercialisation of cotton, I joined the team at the textile gallery of the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester. Over a period of 27 months, the curator explained the major technological inventions, the emergence and the stakes of international competition, the tricks used by entire networks of smugglers, and the legitimate marketing strategies employed by the companies. As for the archives, these record a highly codified typology of African consumers, this “other”, so different that they require specific clothes, created from fabrics that Europeans know how to design but never wear themselves. In the 1990s, these prejudices were still in evidence in public opinion. Marks & Spencer launched a ready-to-wear English wax print collection in floral designs, mostly indigo and white, very far removed from the preconceived ideas of brightly coloured “African fabrics”. But the material, considered for decades as “ethnic”, did not impress British and European customers. Irregularities in the designs due to the wax-dyeing procedures were perceived as flaws, whereas for West African consumers these are a stamp of authenticity and quality.

Looking deeper into the question of wax print and identity, I tried to understand why African women, including those in the West, wear fabrics made in Europe. For me it is an essential paradox, a fundamental issue. Ghanaian and Nigerian women who live in England told me that what I perceive to be a statement of identity is the product of my own projections, interpretations that are too intellectual, completely removed from reality. First of all, they only wear wax print for private functions where they meet other members of their own community; they do not choose to dress in this way to assert themselves with regard to Westerners. In daily life, these women tend towards a certain neutrality, if not invisibility, in their attire, preferring dark coloured ready-to-wear items. For them, wax print outfits are simply beautiful garments of great value. And in the same way as a good perfume is French, a good wax print is, surprisingly, English or Dutch, not African as one might assume. A look inside the wardrobes of my most patient research sources, confirms that wax print only represents a small part of the fabrics they own from Africa: Austrian lace and German bazins hang side by side with Nigerian aso-oke weaves, Ghanaian kente, cotton fabrics dyed in indigo or in flamboyant colours.

In fact, while it grabs my attention, wax print fabric is in the minority in respect of the abundant creativity displayed by African artisans. A grant from the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) in France allowed me to explore this new lead in Mali, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo, in subsequent phases broadening my doctorate studies in Benin, Niger and Senegal. I took a comparative approach at a stage where my thoughts were progressively freeing themselves of any preconceived ideas. Ready to understand the reality without a pre-established framework of analysis, to hear what makes sense for the African people I met, I discovered, contrary to all expectations, that the clash of artisan and industry is non-existent in Africa, and that the diversity in terms of weaving and dyeing is a result of adapting techniques and products from European factories.

The creativity evident in African textiles is not confined to those produced by its most eminent craftspeople, but can also be seen in the way their successors made these Western contributions their own, took a new look at their skills and made them more complex. Archaeology shows that cotton work dates back to at least the 6th century, to a cliff in Bandiagara, in Mali, where fragments of cloth from the Tellem people (now disappeared) demonstrate a perfect mastery of spinning and weaving, as well as the techniques of indigo dyeing.
The progressive developmental structure of this local product has conquered an immense market around the Niger Loop, to the point where this region, covering thousands of square kilometres, has become the epicentre of fabric-weaving, which are distributed across the whole of West Africa. Nevertheless, to take an interest solely in traditional textiles would be to conduct a nostalgic, slightly sterile quest for an ideal state of purity. In fact, other than the beaten or plaited raffia bark that can be seen in isolated places and is confined to specific peoples of the Ivory Coast, most skills are the result of encounters and exchanges with non-indigenous peoples. Textiles unite cultures, and it is fascinating that each culture should have explored the techniques of weaving or dyeing in its own way, to end up creating an original style which is characteristic of that population. The works of Renée Boser-Sarivaxévánix and John Picton opened up this field of study where I worked to survey the terrain. I noticed that the Baoule from the Ivory Coast develop ikat effects, that the Asante from Ghana showcase their geometrical patterns symbolic of the louisine technique, and that the Yoruba are masters of embroidered openwork and float stitch patterns. Far from impoverishing artisanal work, the European fibres and dyes accompany technical improvements and home stylistic differentiation. As a result, the Baoule introduce small brocade motifs in wool which reinforce the meaning given to their works; the Asante use silk to distinguish royal fabrics from weaves for the common people; the Yoruba employ Lurex to give a brilliance to the luxury pagnes.

This phenomenon of finding alternative uses for imported elements can be found across the whole continent, and it includes weaving and dyeing as much as it does the seed bead work in Zulu jewellery or the men's leather capes of the Maasai from Kenya and Tanzania. Industrial products are not perceived by the artisans as competition, but as complementary; they exist to enrich the textures, patterns and even the symbolism, since the new colours combine well with the existing palette. Over time, the adoption of these materials, which have been validated by their industrial reproduction, creates a place for these innovations in a tradition that is both dynamic and symbolic. It is true that spinning cotton on a spindle is losing ground due to the massive importation of industrial cotton fabrics, but at the same time, these imports stimulate a refinement in the field of artisanal fabric dyeing and printings.

The growing diversity of fabrics in Africa has an influence on tastes in clothing. Some cloths previously intended to be worn on a daily basis tend to be reserved for more ritualised uses. However, complementarity is, once again, evident. For example, in Burkina Faso, the factory-made Western red, white and black scarf with a dove pattern called liuli pendé has become as emblematic in the traditional dress of Mossi women as the stripy, traditionally woven gang-la-pelga.

This can also be observed in the fashion arena; in 1997, in Abidjan (Ivory Coast), the first African salon for fashion, textile and design – the K'palezo – presaged the future of the sector. Shortly after the death of Mali fashion designer Chris Seydou, master of an entire generation, designers unanimously promoted wax prints and industrial prints as much as artisan skills, without causing any antagonism. When I returned to live in France in 2002 and made my home in Paris, I witnessed the still somewhat timid emergence of this African fashion on the Western markets, which attracted in particular the members of the diaspora. Some years later, a new wave of designers drove a highly publicised explosion of wax prints created through very selective positioning.
THE CHINESE THREAT?

In the course of successive trips to different countries, I have observed the rapid distribution of products manufactured in China and India. Today, it would be inconceivable to write a book about African fabrics without giving over a significant section to the wave of Asian fabrics unfurling onto the African print market. Indeed, recent positioning and innovations by European and African companies are the result of the Africans’ capacity to anticipate and thwart Asian industrial and commercial strategies.

Mass imports do not appear to have had the negative repercussions predicted to befall the poorest populations, in particular those in the artisan sector. The introduction of second-grade bazin has, in fact, had a rather beneficial effect in the field of dyeing. Without downgrading the excellence of Getzner damask – known for its German quality but actually of Austrian workmanship – which is always worn for special occasions and associated with the prestige of the elite classes, the Chinese product offers a chance for the less well-off to purchase and wear a boubou made in bazin at next-to-no cost. Specifically, this access to Chinese bazin restores a sense of pride and elegance to people on modest incomes, people who are otherwise forced to buy at second-hand clothes stores, reducing them to dressing in the cast-offs handed down by Western charity donations.

The attractiveness of Chinese damask, which is sold white so that it can be dyed, has a direct effect on the increasing number of dye workshops. Today, every mother can become a dyer while working in her own courtyard, enabling her to stay at home with her children. What is more, the healthy rivalry between women drives them to perfect their technical artistry, which in turn allows them to invent patterns. Chinese bazin provides them with a source of revenue and the possibility to dress more often in a fabric that means something to them. This artisanal dyeing is essentially an urban activity, and it has an intense dynamism that brings with it an unanticipated health and environmental risk: toxic products, such as the hydrophilic and caustic soda used to set the synthetic colorants, are inhaled, splashed onto the skin, and poured away with waste water. This problem, which has existed since the first dyeing of “rich” bazin and simple hessian, is aggravated by the exponential rhythm of the commercialisation of Chinese textiles and dyers.

As far as printed fabrics and wax prints are concerned, the Chinese position should be treated with caution. It is true that the operational durability of the Mali fabric company Comatex is assured as a result of Chinese capital, and the Hong Kong group Cha Textiles seems to be the only economic actor capable of organising the cotton clothing sector from the raw fibre to clothes, with a monthly production capacity of more than 12 million metres (13 million yards) of African print and up to 20,000 employees on the continent. Nevertheless, it has to be said that the sometimes dishonest business location strategies have caused the closure of the majority of the textile factories in Western and Central Africa, forcing countries that had been believed to be developing to start a phase of deindustrialisation.

Moreover, the general pillaging by the Chinese of the Dutch Vlisco brand designs is nothing less than an infringement of both intellectual property and exceptional skills. The quality of Chinese wax print is appalling. It is, however, even more regrettable that it is confused with true wax prints from Europe, to the point that it is putting the latter at risk and denigrating all African textiles. For top-of-the-range Western fashion designers to choose Chinese wax print sends a very sorry image of African fabrics. What a huge error to believe that the African way of dressing does not aim for excellence, as much in the artisanal field as in the industrial domain! And what duplicity to dare to sell branded manufactured clothing made from mediocre Asian textiles at such a high price!
Following pages: This print, called *liuli pendé*, has become the national fabric of Burkina Faso. It was imported from Europe after World War II and at first was worn by women as a tied headscarf on ceremonial occasions. Once it started to be produced by the local Faso Fané textile factory it became the subject of national pride. Its popularity continues to grow today. Even if the fabric was printed in Asia continues to grow in popularity among men and women of all generations, from the presidential couple to the most modest citizens of Burkina Faso. The fabric has been used in high fashion collections by the designer Koro DK Style, and became the latest craze among young people with the launch of streetwear T-shirts and caps by the local Burkindi (meaning “integrity”) and Skirt brands. The fabric is even celebrated in a song by Basic Soul entitled *Liuli pendé* (2008).

**WHO WILL SAVE WAX PRINT?**

Today, the African elite is trying to promote local fabrics – wax print and other types – made in factories which have been able to resist Chinese competition by making an original proposal – textiles that are at times made by subsidiaries of European firms or are otherwise associated with them.

As far as the European side of the wax print industry is concerned, following the dismantling of the English ABC factory in 2007 and the demolition of the Newton Bank Printworks site in 2014, it is noticeable that production is suffering badly. This adds to the current difficulties caused by the shameless counterfeiting which is seriously ailing the Dutch Visco textile. Most Africans dream of owning an authentic Visco textile, but those who cannot afford it opt for an Asian copy instead which allows them to buy it at a price they can afford. As a result, it is the responsibility of the Western fashion industry to safeguard the future of genuine wax print. Instead of extolling the excellence of Dutch wax prints and making a genuine contribution to their marketing in the West, however, the European and American luxury sectors remain complacent, discrediting European wax prints by confusing them with Chinese wax prints. Many fashion magazines inadvertently apply the label “wax print” or “boubou” to anything of “ethnic” inspiration. In the fight against counterfeiting, it is of primary importance that the value of the original is highlighted, and not the copy.

The aim of this publication is to give a very detailed explanation of what wax print really is, a fabric that is exceptional due to its origins, the techniques it uses, and the place it has earned in African societies.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, it has been inevitable that Africa would join the process of continuous globalisation. The influence of American urban fashion can be seen in the clothes worn by the younger generation. As a result, the disappearance of true African textiles may become a reality in the coming decades, despite the ingenuity of its artisans and the dynamism of its fashion designers, as well as some manufacturers. It is imperative that the international museums that have made it their mission to put traditional African fabrics from Dakar (Senegal) to Djibouti into their collections are more aware of and interested in contemporary pieces. These fabrics, which bear witness to the transformations taking place within African societies, provide the all-important keys to help us understand the complexity of the relationships between cultures, as well as dialogues between them. What will remain of all these fabrics in the future? Of these “African fabrics” that tell the story of the relationship between Europe and Africa? Of the wax print, of the South African shweshwe, of the light wraps from the banks of the Indian Ocean, all of which are perfect illustrations of the rivalry between England and Holland in their conquest of the textile market, from Western and Central Africa across to Eastern and Southern Africa?

African print is more than a fashion style. The name refers to fabrics that are invested with emotion and meaning, that evolved with the times, and which cannot be reduced to simple “African prints”, or be described as a by-product or one of little value: they bear the mark of a collective history, and are all common “threads” which help us comprehend the global society that we are building together. A combination of diverse influences, these fabrics absorb and recount the changes that have taken place during the 20th century and express hopes for the 21st century. They are dedicated not only to the African legacy to the point of being landmarks of identity, they are also a part of our common human heritage.
FLORAL INDIENNES & WAX PRINTS

Wax print is considered to be the most emblematic of African fabrics, but it is in fact an invented tradition, a product created by Europeans to dazzle the people of West Africa. It all began during the time of Western Imperialism—long before it came to represent a desirable African identity—when the bold, competitive genius of manufacturers and traders transcended borders. Two great rivals, England and Holland, were the contenders of this sprawling conquest which went as far as Asia. It is a story that has endured for centuries...
MANCHESTER COTTONOPOLIS

From the 17th century onwards, and despite the fact that Africa produced its own textiles, the “Dark Continent” became an export market for European manufacturers. As early as 1668, the Dutch physician and writer Olfert Dapper published a list of fabrics suitable for the West African markets in his book, *Description of Africa*. The major shipping companies brought cotton fabrics from India to the ports of Liverpool in England and Nantes in France, and these in turn supplied the rest of Europe, Africa, America and the Caribbean. This trade, later known as intorica (short for India to Africa), focused on checked textiles from Madras, and manually or stamp-printed cloths. In Europe, the fashion for these celebrated chintz or floral *indiennes* was such that soon specialist factories were set up in the Alsace, in several French towns, and in Manchester. Thanks to its proximity to the spinning mills of Lancashire, Cheshire and Derbyshire, Manchester had, by the end of the 18th century, become one of the principal manufacturing centres of floral *indiennes* and a cornerstone of the international trade for cotton fabrics. Its output was distributed as far as India and the West African coasts. And the question is which is more surprising: the fact that Indians were buying floral *indiennes* “made in England”, or that African people adopted these fabrics despite them being twice removed from their own culture.

This early form of globalisation relied on both the remarkable intensification in international trade and exchange of goods between continents as well as the mechanisation of textile printing processes, which were part of the technological progress which dominated the industrial revolution.

AN INDUSTRIAL AND COMMERCIAL REVOLUTION

From the end of the 18th century, major technological innovations brought the textile sector into the industrial era. One of the many consequences of this was to turn the Gulf of Guinea into a veritable consumer haven for European products. In 1733 in England, John Kay invented the flying shuttle. As a result, productivity increased considerably as only one person was required to operate a loom and produce very wide cloths. Richard Arkwright invented the spinning frame, developed into the water frame in 1769, a hydraulic system designed for cotton spinning. Cotton was the new white gold. While it only grew in tropical zones, its transformation into fibre and fabric benefited from an ideal climate in the from the damp north-west of England. Finally, in 1783, Scotsman Thomas Bell applied for a patent for a printing machine with rollers, which proved extremely competitive compared with the boards and embossed stamps previously used to print on fabric. The advances made in the sea trade added to these improved manufacturing techniques. The invention of the steamboat made travel faster and contact more frequent, which facilitated the transport of perishables and smaller quantities of merchandise. The Gold Coast (the south of present-day Ghana) and the Ivory Coast, which were already established as centres for the trade in gold and ivory, could now also supply the plantation palm oil and groundnut oil needed for making soap, candles and machine lubricants. The production and export of these raw materials enriched some African populations which, in return, increased the demand for imported manufactured goods. No transaction occurred without bartering, and the textile producers remained aware of this, always aiming to develop an understanding between all parties. On the Gold Coast, British pieces of silver were used in place of the traditional cowry currency until 1965 when they were replaced by the cedi.

Top: Floral *indiennes* pattern printed in Manchester (UK) for the West African market at the beginning of the 20th century (left), and reproduced in India in 2015 (right).

Above: Madras woven in Chennai (India) for the Nigerian market. The colours contrast with those of the madras worn in the West Indies, as a chrome finish was added locally to yellow it to suit the tastes of the overseas populations.

Right: *Togotex fancy*, with a portrait of the founder of a Togolese Church, Togo.
the Ghanaian currency following the country's independence. The CFA franc, introduced in 1945, remains the official currency of over a dozen French-speaking African countries. It was initially indexed to the French franc, and is now linked to the euro, and has been far more conducive to the exchange of goods imported from Great Britain and Holland than the regularly devalued Nigerian naira. There are as many stakes involved in this business as there are patterns in wax fabric. However, when considering the technical progress and structural developments that have helped the textile trade in Africa flourish, from its beginnings until today, it is important to remember one major factor: the influence of missionaries. They prepared people’s minds for a new desire: the wearing of European fabrics.

**THE ROLE OF THE MISSIONARIES**

From 1860, the work of the Basel Mission became a determining factor in the distribution of industrially produced cotton fabrics. This Protestant organisation, founded in Switzerland, set itself the mission of making indigenous people financially independent — through crafts and agriculture — and to evangelise them. It did, of course, also ensure the missionaries’ supplies, so much so that the Basel merchants who were at the head of the mission hoped to make this latter an integral part of global trade.

It was within this context that the missionaries taught young African girls to sew, a skill previously reserved for men. They introduced these girls to European fabrics – which were easier to work when compared with the thicker local weaves – as well as the sewing machine, invented and patented in 1830 by the Frenchman Barthélemy Thimonier and sold around the world by Singer. These factors contributed to the establishment of a new dress code. The missionaries developed a valuable expertise through contact with the African populations. They informed the European traders about African tastes, and the first manufacturers of export fabrics relied on their advice. As the traders themselves did not travel, they simply interpreted the information they had received for an imaginary customer base. All things considered, the objectives of the Basel Mission might be summarised as three Cs: Christianity, civilisation and commerce.

The missionaries also noticed that some women on the Gold Coast named the patterns printed on affordable English fabric, which has become known globally as "Manchester" cloth. Indeed, these designs found an echo in African cultures, in particular with the Akan people, of which the powerful Asante are a subgroup. The British were very interested in this region as the Asante possessed large gold deposits, and it was through the relationships they built with Asante dignitaries that they were able to conquer the region.

Textiles therefore formed a significant economic stake, which did not fail to exacerbate the competition between the European nations that wanted to extend their spheres of influence across the world. And as they gradually carved up and shared out the African continent, Southeast Asia also became an ever more covetable area.
THE EMERGENCE OF HOLLAND

Having robbed the Dutch of their colonial empire, the English occupied the Indonesian archipelago between 1811 and 1816 and started to sell cotton fabrics there. They were forced to hand Java back to the Dutch in 1816. This started a trade war between the two powers which prompted the Dutch textile industry to create a new Asia-inspired cloth, in keeping with the floral indiennes of previous centuries, and which would enthuse the African population.

REGIONAL RIVALRIES

When the Netherlands won back its market share, the Haarlemse Katoen Maatschappij HKM (Haarlem cotton company) won the monopoly for the importation of textiles. The victory, however, formed part of a complex geopolitical situation. On the European continent, Holland was forced to cede Flanders to Belgium in 1830, and thus it had to modernise its textile industry and install it in new regions. Holland adopted the flying shuttle to improve yield and create wider fabrics. As a result, mass production began, in particular in 1834 at Prévinaire & Wilson in Haarlem in the north of the country, and at P.F. van Vlissingen & Co. (the future Vlisco) in Helmond in the south in 1846. Although the country was able to obtain preferential import rates, this did not always guarantee competitiveness for Dutch manufacturers. However, they nevertheless distinguished themselves through the quality of their dyes – especially the red – and these did artificially bolster Dutch supremacy over the British.

At the same time, Holland was fighting the Padri War (1803–1837) in Sumatra. This was a political-religious conflict led by a Wahhabi group who had set about converting a part of the Indonesian archipelago to a radical form of Islam. While claiming to defend the local population Holland, the colonial power, really had its sights set on the island of Java and through it, control of the trade routes. The superiority of Dutch weaponry and its involvement with local leaders allowed it to achieve its aims. Furthermore, Holland had been able to rely on some 3,000 African soldiers, sent from the Gold Coast to fight on the Java front. A legend was born of this multicultural conflict: “Once upon a time there was a cloth intended for Indonesia that no one found attractive. It was then introduced to West Africa, where it met with huge success. The wax print had found its market, and the cloth and the people were never again to be separated.”

THE BIRTH OF THE WAX PRINT

Once their presence in Java was assured, the Dutch developed an ambitious industrial and commercial strategy to maximise profit on the Asian market. Following the method used to print floral indiennes, the Dutch began to compete with the artisanal batik production, mimicking the designs which were delicately drawn by hand using the hot wax resist technique and highly visible on the right and wrong sides of the fabric. The quality of these fabrics was universally recognised, and the local elite rated them highly. In around 1850, the Prévinaire-HKM company attempted to launch a true industrial batik. Known as “wax” print, this textile was unique but did not manage to establish itself against the Java batiks, for aesthetic and economic reasons. For one thing, the veined effect caused when the dye bled into the wax cracks was not considered attractive. Nor was the price: the Java artisans increased productivity by applying the wax with stamps made from copper bands rather than the traditional bamboo stylus (known

Above: A young woman in a Manchester (United Kingdom) factory printing on fabric using a wooden stamp in around 1823.

Right: Indonesian batik from the island of Java. The edging of the cloth bears triangular patterns (tampal) symbolising the growth of bamboo. The central section features a representation of the wings of Garuda. These two patterns were introduced into the iconography of wax print.
as cantiqng), and the advantageous rates from which the Dutch products benefited were suspended in 1872.

The industrialists were convinced of the quality of the wax in which they had invested considerable sums, and sought another outlet. It was at this time that the missionaries reported to the Scottish merchant Ebenezer Brown Fleming (1853–1912) that 700 Gold Coast soldiers had returned home from Java with batiks which then became the latest craze in their homeland. Paradoxically, it was the veined effect and the imperfect alignment of colours added with the stamp – considered to be flaws by the Indonesians – that they found the most pleasing. They appreciated the quality of the colour penetration, an important aspect in regions with fierce sunshine.

The demand was there, and Brown Fleming seized the opportunity: in 1893, he delivered the first cargo of Dutch industrial batiks to the Gold Coast. As a result, Brown Fleming, who specialised in the Asian markets, gained exclusive rights to HKM's designs. He set up a large network of local agents who together with the African people were able to direct production. And this is how the patterns that came from the "Manchester" cloth were transferred to wax prints.

From the marketing ambitions of a group of missionaries to the legendary gallantry of Africans returning home laden with gifts, wax print is the composite product of an era when Europe sought to control the world. Created by adapting and borrowing from traditional designs, this singular fabric whetted the appetite of many manufacturers.
FROM EUROPE TO AFRICA

Dutch wax has been influential for a long time, as much for its prestige as for its excellence. The Dutch textile industry was not only the first historical wax producer, but - with Vlisco - remains the only manufacturer in Europe today. Wax, like the rest of the sector, experienced exponential growth in the 20th century, accompanied by crises that brought about factory closures – Roessingh in 1935 and Ankersmit in 1965 – and mergers among the big international groups such as the pioneer P.F. van Vlissingen (known as Vlisco). Vlisco became a part of Gamma Holding in 1969 and, as a result, brought its exotic prints section to the most powerful Dutch textile group in Europe. It was eventually bought out by Actis in 2010. Vlisco, the so-called “father of wax print” has followed a remarkable path for over 170 years. Founded in 1846, it purchased the original wax print designs belonging to the HKM company when it ceased trading in 1918.

A EUROPEAN RIVALRY

Following the Dutch success, many European manufacturers jumped on the wax print bandwagon.

In Switzerland, several manufacturers in the canton of Glarus produced wax print, in particular Hohenstein (from 1928 to 1974). But it was thanks to the Brunnschweiler company, which inherited a company in Ennenda that specialised in madras fabrics, that wax print was to assert itself. In England, wax print was produced from 1902 by several factories in the Manchester area: Broad Oak, Newton Bank Printworks, Horridge & Cornall-Bohold Works, B.F. Crompton, Astbury & Pickford and Marple Printing Company. For these companies, which were already using indigo dye and producing prints for the African markets, wax print was a way to diversify; some were not able to accomplish all...
the stages of the process themselves, and so the fabrics sometimes passed from one production unit to another. In fact, English manufacturing was completely dependent on the orders of the traders known as merchant converters, who were the key players in the industry. The most important were Eison & Neil, H.J. Barrett, Grafton African, A.H. Emery, J.A. Duke, Joseph Bridge, Richard Brotherton and Logan Muckelt. Indeed, it was these trade businesses which through their contact with the consumers prospected, came up with the designs, chose the colours, supplied the raw cloth and were responsible for the sale of the finished product. The English factories did not maintain any stocks of wax prints. As demand decreased at some factories between 1940 and 1966, Newton Bank Printworks, based in Hyde, Manchester, since 1816 and owned by the Ashton family, bought out its competitors to become the only production site for English wax until it closed in 2007. As for the trade companies Grafton and Eison & Neil, these were bought out by Brunnschweiler, the traditional madras fabric distributor, which progressively became a key partner on account of its market knowledge and its commercial network in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Brunnschweiler was a recognised brand, and although it was based in Switzerland, the company was also registered in Manchester for its financial transactions. It was part of the Calico Printers' Association which brought together 46 British textile companies and represented 85 per cent of the UK's production. In 1970, English wax print took on the name of Arnold Brunnschweiler & Company, known under the acronym ABC. It was important for ABC to distinguish itself from the rest in a sector that was undergoing great changes.

Indeed, it was these trade businesses which through their contact with the consumers prospected, came up with the designs, chose the colours, supplied the raw cloth and were responsible for the sale of the finished product.

**WORKING WITH THE INDEPENDENT STATES**

In 1959, all factories together produced a total of 48.3 million metres (52.8 million yards) of wax print. When the West African states attained their independence in 1960, and with the process of decolonisation that followed, the major international companies were forced to become involved in the industrialisation of the new countries to protect their own outlets. Texoprint, which comprised the Ankersmitt and van Vlissingen companies, decided to reduce production in the Netherlands and to position itself in the luxury sector. To offer the African consumer a more accessible, locally produced wax print, it founded the Ghana Textiles Printing Company (the future GTP) in Ghana in 1966, then Uni-wax in Ivory Coast in 1968. At the same time, the English Calico Printers' Association conglomerate opened wax print factories in Nigeria and Zaïre (the present Democratic Republic of the Congo).

The Swiss company Hohlenstein Textildruckerei AG financed the Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) factory which opened in 1967, with the support of United Trading Company (UTC), which is also Swiss, and which operated in Nigeria, then in Senegal with the Société de Teinture, Blanchiment, Apprêts et d’Impressions Africaine (Sotiba-Simapfric) in Dakar in 1969.
The newly independent Africans were thus no longer mere clients of the international textile industry, but also producers under the auspices of the European groups. As the decades went by, they were also to get the measure of the Chinese groups' ambitions.

CHINAFRICA

For more than a century India and Java inspired "African" prints without Asia being particularly closely associated with their production or their trade. Yet the Chinese industry was not a complete stranger to the market. After 1945, English wax print manufacturers started to abandon the ecru textile woven in the spinning mills of Lancashire for cotton fabrics imported from China and Japan.

THE CHA GROUP

During the 1990s, the Hong Kong Cha Group – named after its founder, Cha Chi Ming – was already believed to represent up to 65 per cent of the wax print market. This group, based in Hong Kong, a British colony until 1997, had invested in Africa since 1964, creating the United Nigerian Textiles Limited (UNTL) and Nichemtex factories in Nigeria, then buying Akosombo Textiles Limited (ATL) in Ghana. In 1992, it bought out the English ABC company, and made it responsible for the training of designers and technicians for the Ghanaian subsidiary. ABC’s historic Newton Bank Printworks factory closed at the end of 2007 and the machines were transferred to Akosombo.

In England, only the team of ABC designers was retained: the designs, colours and styles it creates are transmitted to Ghana. Hong Kong Chinese Cha does not produce any wax print in China. And, like the other textile manufacturers, it is today facing direct competition from the Asian giant.

THE NEW LEADING NATION

China surprised everyone when it began to invest in the wax print sector. It all started in 2005 when the World Trade Organisation lifted import quotas on textiles and clothing. Consequently, in the space of just a few years, China set up around twenty factories in its own country, some distributing their own brand – for instance, Hitarget – and others supplying European and African textile designers. These fabrics, less covetable than Dutch wax print but extremely competitive, are in part responsible for African factories ceasing their operations. It also raises the question as to how the Chinese companies manage to sell a wax print at a lower price than the raw fabric the Cha group factories can buy! Unfair practices have been reported, and in all likelihood dumping has enabled them to conquer the markets.

China is the big winner of the opening up the textile markets and has become the new leader in terms of production volumes. India is in second position; it too has meddled in the market for "African print" and, ironically, even reproduces, on very cheap synthetic materials, floral indiennes designs which were once printed in Manchester.

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LABELS AND SELVEDGES

The diversity of the labels affixed to wax print fabrics reflects the abundance of brands. They are used to boast of luxury, with golden letters and a scattering of stars, the number of which, however, is inversely proportionate to the actual quality of the products! The name of the brand that features on the selvedge is what counts. Through these signatures, which have evolved with the rhythm of the changes in the industry, it is possible to unravel a potted history of wax print. In England, the first wax prints bore no signature. Then the name of the merchant converters appeared, such as Elson & Neill or Grafton-ABC, followed by the registration number of the design and an assurance: "Guaranteed English Wax". At the end of the 1960s, the emergence of the Ivory Coast and Togo markets required the specification "True English Wax" because the French-speaking Africans were often convinced that the English wax print was made in Nigeria, their English-speaking neighbour. Then, in 1994, the devaluation of the CFA franc caused the price of English wax print to double in Abidjan (Ivory Coast), Lomé (Togo) and Cotonou (Benin), and it became essential to avoid any confusion. The ABC company, forced to justify the value of its products to keep its customers, adapted its marketing strategy by highlighting the quality of its fabrics. The company positioned itself as a brand and created a logo depicting a sun, which was placed on the selvedge with the assurance "Guaranteed Wax ABC Made in England" along with a French translation, stating the origin. The selvedge was modified again in 2007 when the production unit relocated to Ghana, a century after the factory launched its first wax print (1908), indicating clearly, "Guaranteed Wax ABC Made in Ghana" and "véritable wax ABC fabriqué au Ghana". When it comes to the real origin of a product, however, the selvedge can be misleading. For example, the wax print merchants John Jagger and Albert Hill, whose company is registered in Manchester, used the words "Jaggerhill Textiles Manchester England" at the end of the 1990s when their designs were printed in China. The Dutch brand Vlisco defines itself simply as "Guaranteed Dutch Wax Vlisco" and adds its monogram "VWH" on the selvedge of its superwaxes. The excellence of Dutch wax print, however, is such that its competition can sometimes implicitly take advantage of it. ABC, for example, produced a "true wax print of distinction", a luxury fabric with the acronym "VIP" added for a London-based distributor who was also selling the Vlisco brand, without giving any indication of its geographic origin. This could have misled clients to believe, intentionally or not, that the high-quality wax print with an equally high price tag had come from Holland. Even in the Netherlands, some producers have concealed the exact origin of their wax prints. One example is the Jansen family which, for three generations, has sold wax prints in Helmond, where Vlisco is based. The company, called Jansen Holland, entrusted several of its designs to ABC with the selvedge words "Jansen Holland Guaranteed Wax". Since 2002, this company has operated out of China under the Julius Holland brand, perpetuating the Dutch legend with its stamp "Guaranteed Wax Julius Holland" unchallenged. On the other hand, no one claims that wax print comes from China. In fact, the selvedge "Made as Holland" or "Hollander" indicate Vlisco copies. Fabrics that come from India are, however, identified as such. Informative or misleading, the selvedge makes wax print much more than a simple fabric, it creates an object of desire.
WAX REAL DIMATEX 50001, COPIED FROM VLISCO 3739. CHINA.

VLISCO 3826, CALLED "BILLIONAIRE". 1984. HOLLAND, NETHERLANDS.