

(RE)-REPRESENTING AUTHENTICITY THROUGH FACTORY-PRINTED
CLOTHS OF AFRICA

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of factory-printed cloth in Africa and its potential to communicate various messages through its use as clothing. Factory-printed cloth also has unintended communicative value when it is displayed outside Africa in museum contexts. Factory-printed cloth made a relatively late appearance in the literature and exhibit history of African cloth. One reason for this is that the cloth was not considered 'African', as its production combines African design with European technology. The introduction of factory-printed cloth to Africa provided a new way in which to communicate messages through cloth, as faces of important people and text could be printed directly onto cloth. This technique has proved useful in commemorating special people or events in Africa. I begin this study by examining issues of authenticity, in relation to African material culture in museum settings and then provide a history of research carried out on African factory-printed cloth and its appearance in museum and gallery exhibitions. This has led to contemporary forms of art historical and anthropological research. Some of the latter, including my own, has involved field collecting of commemorative cloths in West Africa. My research resulted in a museum exhibition of factory-printed cloth at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology in February 2004. The Textile Museum of Canada also exhibited factory-printed cloth in 2004. A case study of both these exhibits will take place here to illuminate how factory-printed cloth can provide insights into a post-colonial countries' political, social and cultural environments, whether the cloth is worn as clothing in Africa or displayed in museums abroad.

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CHAPTER 1: Re-Representing Authenticity through Factory-Printed Cloths of Africa

1.1 Introduction

“...objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become. This is to contradict a pervasive identification in museum research and material culture studies which stabilizes the identity of a thing in its fixed and founded material form” (Thomas 1991:4).

If we were to interpret factory-printed cloths in their “fixed and founded material form” as Thomas states, we would be looking at a novel commodity and technology introduced to Africa by Europeans. However, factory-printed cloth is a product of both African design and European technology, and has its beginnings in the colonial period. African people have worn this type of cloth for over 150 years. Originally printed in factories in Europe and then marketed in Africa, factory-printed cloth became a luxury good that West Africans assimilated into a pre-existing tradition of valuing cloth and using it to signify identity, status and prestige. Today, most of the cloth is designed and printed in Africa and has been appropriated and modified by West Africans to suit their own systems of meanings, preferences and style.

Research methods in African textiles and clothing practices have changed in the past 15 years. Not only has more research been based on fieldwork but more research has focused on urban Africa, taking into consideration historical and global factors. These new changes are already reflected in museum settings through new textile exhibitions that challenge previous portrayals of Africa. The display of factory-printed cloths in museum exhibits of African textiles is one way to refocus previous portrayals of Africa. John Picton (1995:24-25) explains that some may view these fabrics as the products of European industry and that this may account for their relatively late entry into the subject matter of African art-historical research. In the field of anthropology, however, I suggest that due to the previous lack of scholarship on urban

contemporary African societies, the cloths' value in these settings has been relatively overlooked until recently.

Researchers' present foci on urban settings in Africa, in addition to conducting research in villages, has led to new ways of representing clothing practices in Africa. Focusing on urban settings in Africa is a recent change in anthropology (Mustafa 2003 pers. comm.; Parker 2000:19-22). "For anthropologists, the remote village has long been the site *par excellence* of traditional culture – an outside, a place in which to locate the Other, a site of redemption at some remove from the metropole and the global system"(Piot 1999:178). As factory-printed cloth is produced in factories within or near cities in Africa, and acquires value from urban market women, the previous lack of scholars studying urban Africa may have also led to the exclusion of the cloth from study.¹

Since many scholars have customarily studied "traditional" aspects of West African societies, museum displays have reflected various traditional societies. Thus, African textile exhibits in North America and Europe tend to focus on hand-woven cloth such as *kente*, indigenously produced by textile artisans for hundreds of years in Ghana. Though *kente* may be regarded by some as the traditional or authentic cloth of Ghana, and more generally of Africa, factory-printed cloths are also culturally significant and authentic textiles of Africa.² Factory-printed cloth has recently been adopted and used in museum and gallery exhibitions to dispel essentialized identities (Thomas 2000:198). The complex history of factory-printed cloth allows it to reach beyond any single affiliation and be open to multivalent interpretations (Bickford 1995:4). The interpretations that can be derived from factory-printed cloths of Africa in museum and gallery exhibitions particularly interest me and are the focus of this study.

¹ Factory-printed cloth does "travel" from cities to towns and villages where people also wear it, but its appearance in these markets is on a much smaller scale as compared to the city markets (Bickford 1995:149).

² Factory-printed cloth is produced by skilled textile designers and technicians in Ghana and in other West African countries. I argue that it can also be considered an artistic production indigenous to many West African countries and therefore an authentic textile of the region.

The inclusion of factory-printed cloths in African textile exhibits challenges norms of museum representation and former considerations of African culture and identity. Indeed, it is important to note that the very “otherness” of factory printed cloth sets the stage for multiple interpretations of identity in ways that handmade textiles, with their ethnic or regional associations, cannot (Bickford 1995:145). By “otherness” I mean that factory-printed cloth often assumes the status of mass-produced goods in the alien environment of the factory which may lead some to view these cloths as something that is “other” than “African”, because they were not hand-crafted.

Factory-printed cloth is significant in West Africa and beyond, and communicates various messages through its use as clothing. A range of research has focused on factory-printed cloth (Rabine 2002; Picton 1995, 2001; Bickford 1995; Domowitz 1992; Steiner 1985; Littrell 1977 and Nielson 1974) and its appearance in museum and gallery exhibitions (Spencer 1982; Picton 1995 and Bickford 1997). While scholars have analyzed the significance of the cloth from an ethnographic perspective, no research has been based on a field collection of cloth intended for an exhibit. Prior research also has overlooked the process of collecting and exhibiting factory-printed cloth. The cloth is particularly useful in dispelling preconceived notions of African culture and identity in museum and gallery exhibits. However, the cloth’s communicative value in these settings almost certainly was not foreseen by the producers or users of the cloth, thus supporting Thomas’ point that, “objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become.” What objects “become” depends on the interpretation of users, vendors and consumers of the object, or even sometimes the interpretation of museum curators, or the collaboration of curators with users and consumers, as will be demonstrated in this study.

The study is based on two collections. The primary focus is an extensive study of a museum collection of four factory-printed cloths printed in Ghana between 1998-2001.

What is unique about the collection is that ethnographic research I carried out in urban Ghana in 2001 accompanies it. The textiles are all commemorative ones and were collected with the intention of exhibiting the cloths in a museum setting. All four textiles are currently on display at the UBC Museum of Anthropology (MOA). My exhibit *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration: Factory-Printed Cloths of Ghana* was developed with the Ghanaian community of Vancouver along with other West African community groups.

The exhibit highlights the significance of factory-prints in Ghana and in West Africa in general. It furthermore integrates the concept of fashion and women's power in selecting textiles, marketing and wearing them. A certain section of the display provides visitors with a crash course in Ghanaian politics, revealing how a society conducts political campaigns, votes and commemorates important leaders and guests using cloth. That factory-printed cloths are used to communicate and advertise, and are considered high fashion is apparent in the exhibit. Most importantly it is demonstrated that factory-printed cloth is a popular and authentic choice of dress in West Africa.

To further develop the study on the communicative value of factory-printed cloth in museum settings, I also consider a second collection of over 60 factory-printed cloths and a museum exhibition at the Textile Museum of Canada (TMC). The collection came from three main donors who lived and worked in West Africa in the 1970's. The cloth had been kept by the donors for 20 years before being donated to the Textile Museum of Canada. The cloth was meagerly documented, except for information on when and where it was collected. Textile Museum of Canada curator Max Allen conducted research on the collection, which developed into a museum exhibition titled *Image Factories: African Cloth about Culture and Politics*. This exhibit focused on African history and political leaders' legacies, each cloth telling a detailed story through the curator's interpretation.

The contributions that I add to current research on factory-printed cloth are as follows.

First, I will provide a concentrated study of two museum collections and recent exhibits of factory-printed cloth, discussing both the process and the content of these exhibits in comparison to each other and to past exhibits. Second, through this study I will show how economic, social and political realities of a country can be discovered by examining what types of cloth are printed, when and in what types of social interactions and cultural contexts. Lastly, I will be contributing to the small body of anthropological and museum research that exists on contemporary West African material culture through my discussion of factory-printed cloth in relation to debates on authenticity. I argue that factory-printed cloth is authentic to Africa and that it comprises an essential part of African material culture. The research in this thesis is limited to factory-printed cloths of Africa with a focus on Canadian museum collections of cloths in Vancouver and Toronto.

1.2 Authenticity

“...if we consider factory-printed cloth decorated with a proverb written in English to be as African as Yoruba *adire* cloth, surely we must expand or perhaps rid ourselves of the constrictive category “traditional art” (Rovine 1996:19).

In the 1970s and 1980s, research on textiles of Africa focused on production techniques and the visual appearance of cloth. Although the 1989 second edition of the book *African Textiles* edited by John Picton and John Mack has become the essential reference on African textiles, little is present in this book on the social salience of cloth and the economic conditions that surround its production in the lives of Africans. *African Textiles* was first published in 1979 and then republished in 1989 when Picton removed the word “traditional” to describe textiles, as he thought it was redundant and misleading: “the phrase ‘traditional textiles’ denotes a category of practice justified by past precedent and essentially unchanging, in contrast to the possibilities of innovation and development...traditionality was, indeed, exposed as a fiction denoting an invented and perhaps spurious authenticity” (Picton 1995:11). Picton (1995:11) claimed that it

was no longer acceptable to represent a textile tradition as a social practice being passed on if the word “traditional” was to be contrasted with “contemporary.”

Viewing textiles as “social practices being passed on” is a suitable way with which to study factory-printed cloth. Elise Dubuc (2002:1; pers. comm. 2003) described how anthropologists have come to look at clothing as “total social objects” and that an in-depth knowledge of a society can be gained by studying clothing in its entirety and not simply as art objects.³ Besides the current approach of viewing clothing as “total social objects”, even earlier social theory (Appadurai 1986:6) also suggests how cloth can be seen as having a “social life” in which its value and meaning change as it moves through space and time over the years of change in a community.⁴

Renne (1995:5) found this to be the case in Bunu, Nigeria, where cloth is the “product of social life”. I myself found this to be true while researching factory- printed cloth in Ghana, West Africa in 2001. The cloth is used to communicate various social messages to the public, as well as commemorate numerous social events such as political party campaigns, birthdays, funerals and weddings. Not only does this cloth visibly make its appearance at social events on people’s bodies or folded as gifts and unfolded and displayed, this cloth also appears in other ways as well.

In 2001, Ghana Textiles Printing Company (GTP) broadcasted a television commercial that depicted a large multi-generational Ghanaian family at a grand celebration. In the commercial, all the family members are wearing factory-printed cloth and are smiling and dancing to Ghanaian music while folded factory-printed cloth is being passed from one family

³ Schneider and Weiner (1989) began this movement by bringing women producers and users of cloth to centre stage while analyzing how women navigate social realms through exchange or exchange and withholding (Weiner 1992) of cloth wealth.

⁴ Appadurai (1986) focuses on commodities as things that have social lives, and I apply this paradigm to cloth. Kopytoff (cited in Appadurai, 1986) further states that with the process of movement through space and time a commodity acquires a cultural biography. I believe that through studying cloth a cultural biography of the cloth as well as a cultural biography of the people connected to the cloth can be obtained.

member to another. At the end of the commercial a woman's voice states, "Ghana Textiles, Bringing Fabric to Life." Here, the idea of factory-printed cloth being embedded in the social life of people is evident even in the marketing strategies employed by textile firms. As suggested in this media clip, I argue that the cloths are authentic because they are an intrinsic part of the social life of the people who use them.

CHAPTER 2: Placing Factory-Printed Cloth

What does the word 'Ghana' remind you of? Does it make you think of cheerful African women in splendid colourful robes with a matching scarf tied around their heads? You would imagine that to be typically African, wouldn't you? But actually, it is typically Dutch, because Vlisco, the manufacturer of these colourful fabrics, was founded 150 years ago in the Southern Dutch town of Helmond.

-Yvette Turlings, Reporter for Netherlands Radio, April 8, 2002

To the average African, to buy Real Dutch Wax constitutes a huge expenditure. But then again, it is not only bought for dressing. People sometimes see it as a kind of investment. The value of the textiles tends to be more stable than many African currencies! There are people who buy RDW when they see trouble ahead, because its value doesn't go down. They know it will always keep its value, just like gold or diamonds. That is why many people use our products for dowry too.

-Hank Bremer, Vlisco's Regional Director for Africa , (New African, March 2000)

In December, 1994, I was sitting in the town of Toma in northern Burkina Faso watching local women bustling by with large loads balanced on their heads. I admired the way the women appeared to effortlessly move about the village with their cargo while wearing colourful, intricately tailored clothes. I began to examine the dress of these women more carefully over the next year and again when I returned in 2001.

The women were wearing factory-printed cloths or wax prints, which was not what I had assumed was authentic African dress. Actually I had never formulated what I considered to be authentic African dress before arriving in West Africa my first time, but I had not expected so many people to be wearing this kind of dress. Many of the cloths had images and text printed over the usually abstractly designed background. Some wore cloths with faces of people or

advertisements for products or events printed on it. I did not like these cloths at first. I did not think they fit into the environment. I did not understand the language of these cloths or their history. I did not understand the "social life" of these cloths.

The question above, "What does Ghana remind you of?" posed by the reporter Yvette Turlings who interviewed Hank Bremer, Vlisco's regional director for Africa, demonstrates how notions of authenticity are not always correctly inferred. What is typically African is assumed to be a brightly coloured dress and matching headscarf. But, "What exactly is typical African dress?" asked Jean Comaroff during a discussion following a lecture she presented at the University of British Columbia in 2003.⁵ Indeed, the reporter above is correct when she claims that a form of dress may be considered typically African (when it is actually typically Dutch) in its place of manufacture, but even this can be debated.⁶

Factory-printed cloth was manufactured by Europeans assuming that what was produced would be readily accepted by West African consumers. What instead happened was a hit and miss approach where Vlisco tried many different patterns, colours and styles before realizing that the company's products were not driven by Vlisco's ideas but by the West Africans'.⁷ Vlisco's printed cloth became a luxury good that West Africans did save up to buy, not because they were foreign but because the cloth had been assimilated into the already present tradition of valuing cloth and using it to signify identity, status and prestige through ownership. In Ghana, older women may have over one hundred pieces of factory-printed cloth stored in their cloth boxes (Littrell 1977:91). Scholars such as Bickford (1995) and myself have applied the work of Weiner (1992) who recognized that certain cloths are possessed of qualities which make them 'inalienable possessions' and imbue their owners with power.

⁵ Comaroff, Jean. "The End of History, Again? Pursuing the Past in the Postcolony." University of British Columbia, March 6 2003.

⁶ In fact, the Dutch entered this market by accident when trying to imitate Indonesian batiks, so the origin of manufacture is not typically Dutch either. (See Appendix 1)

⁷ See Steiner 1985 for more historical background on this.

There is a long-standing practice in Africa of using cloth as a form of visual communication and as an agent in the formation of social identities.⁸ Some scholars claim that cloth is the most obvious feature of the material culture of Africa (Picton 1989:11). Particular colours, weaves, patterns and methods of wearing cloth may reveal that the wearer is associated with great wealth or status. Perani and Wolff state that:

Everywhere, Africans use cloth to dress themselves and things important. Cloth, the most important two-dimensional art form in Africa, possesses qualities which encourage a multitude of usages. Being flexible and portable, it enfolds, wraps and encloses. Cloth invites decoration and through colour and pattern carries a rich symbolic message. (1999:25)

Cloth is involved in every aspect of African life, playing an essential role in marriage, political communications and ritual exchanges. Cloth mediates relationships through gift exchange and gives prestige to those who accumulate it. Cloth may identify one as a bride, as a chief, as a wealthy individual, or as part of a group. In fact, in many African contexts, expressions of self worth are tied to group membership and it is common for members of a group to wear identical dress to show group affiliation (Perani and Wolff 1999:29). In Africa, social identities are commonly enacted through the use of cloth. With this in mind, it becomes clear how factory-printed textiles made for Africa by European companies such as Vlisco became accepted into already established systems of using and valuing cloth. The acceptance of factory-printed cloth must be seen as part of a larger history, one in which textiles have held a place as important commodities actively traded for centuries (Bickford 1995:32).

Factory-printed cloth conveys a variety of messages from the wearer to the surrounding public. The cloth can communicate an individual's emotional or financial state, one's allegiance to a political party or membership in an organization while making commentary on events

⁸ Perani and Wolff discuss clothing in Africa as part of the "bodily practices" that mediate a personal realization of social values in a society and that clothing reflects a conscious projection of individual self. "In the quest to express one's personal worth, an individual can draw upon a rich vocabulary of cloth and clothing to express prestige, proclaim group membership or challenge tradition" (Perani and Wolff 1999:29).

happening around the wearer at the time. While named patterns of cloth are used as oblique communication, other cloths communicate directly through written text messages printed onto the cloth alongside various pictures. Factory-printed cloth has become a significant form of communication in West Africa as will be demonstrated in the MOA and TMC collection case studies.

The cloths in these collections were almost all designed and printed in Africa. Cloth is printed to commemorate various events such as university and church openings, women's groups, beauty pageants or New Years' parties. As has become common in Ghana and elsewhere in West Africa, cloths with photos of representatives of political parties can inform the public about who is running in the upcoming election. Consumers could purchase these cloths and have them tailored into fashionable attire. In a sense, the people who wear these cloths are like walking billboards, advertising a candidate up until the public casts its vote. As will be seen, factory-printed cloth can also be used to commemorate the electoral winner with a photo of the new leader and the political campaign motto and colours printed onto the cloth. This cloth may be worn the day the new leader is inaugurated and at various celebration parties.

Today in Ghana, factory-printed cloth may be used at funerals to commemorate a deceased leader, showing a photo, name and date of birth and death on the cloth. This cloth can be worn at funeral celebrations and identifies the wearer as a mourner and member of the funeral party. What cloth one chooses to buy in the market communicates a message to others and identifies the wearer with a particular cause, whether it is a political, familial, religious or social one (Bickford 1995). Compared to woven cloth, the messages conveyed by factory-printed cloth are easily accessible in West Africa today. For example, with woven cloth one would have to read the weave, colours and patterns, and be knowledgeable about the system to understand the message - a skill not necessarily passed down to all today (pers. observ. 2001).

2.1 Reading Factory-Printed Cloth

“The women’s long cloth skirts are printed so gaily with the oddest things: there is no telling when a raft of yellow umbrellas, or the calico cat and gingham dog, or an upside-down image of the Catholic Pope might just go sauntering across our yard” (Kingsolver 1998:103).

As Kingsolver’s reflections suggest, the language of factory-printed cloths is not easily read by outsiders. Missionaries, scholars and others who visit countries in West and East Africa may be puzzled by the cloth. Several scholars have produced literature in English on factory-printed cloth and some of these scholars have even focused on reading these cloths. The earliest account of scholarship on factory-printed cloth is Ruth Neilsen’s (1974) thesis that addresses the way factory-printed cloth, referred to by Neilsen as wax-printed cloth, was marketed by European manufacturers to Africa. An appendix to this work by Justine Cordwell notes that with the advent of new printing techniques, faces of leaders could be placed upon the cloth, enabling Africans to make “quiet but effective” commentary on the existing establishment. This was done by positioning the portrait of the British or French rulers, or their own political leaders, in such a way that one could “innocently” sit on them. Some days, such a print could be “accidentally” worn upside down (Cordwell 1979: 495).

On a different note, Christopher Steiner (1985) elaborates on Neilsen’s past research and remarks that Europeans did not impose their marketing preferences on Africans, but produced and designed factory-printed cloth to suit Africans’ style and taste preferences. While it is true that European companies introduced the technology for the production of factory-printed cloth and now thrive off the capital made in West Africa particularly, it is the West Africans, and especially the market women who have created the demand for this cloth. European manufactures consult market women to determine which designs they should reprint and which they should discontinue. Men wear these cloths tailored into shirts or pants, or draped around

their bodies, but women are the primary consumers of these fabrics, buying enough to have a skirt, top and headscarf sewn, or to be worn in a wrap-around style.

Domowitz (1992) addresses the communicative value of factory-printed cloth in West Africa and women's roles in creating this system. All over West Africa, women set up textile stalls in the market to sell factory-printed cloth. However, it takes more than just a nicely coloured cloth to catch on in these markets. Market women give names to certain patterned cloths and their success in the market depends on the names given (Domowitz 1992). Domowitz's research is based on fieldwork and was the first to focus on the significance of the cloth in African societies. The names given to cloths serve to communicate oblique messages about the wearer. Names such as "Co-wife Rivalry is Like Cow Dung" and "Men are Not Like Ears of Corn" become attached to specific patterns on cloths.

A wide number of scholars have considered the social life of cloth. While Domowitz examined an aspect of the cultural significance of factory-printed cloth not easily apparent to outsiders, Perani and Wolff (1999) discuss commemorative cloth and how it is used to form and communicate group identities. Victoria Rovine (2001) includes research on factory-printed *bogolan* (mud cloth) as an essential element of dress and perpetuation of identity in Mali. Kathleen Bickford (1995) also discusses factory-printed cloth in relation to the process of the formation of identity. Group identity is also the subject of Sandra Klopper's (2000) work that examines how factory-printed cloth has made its way into the South African dress code as the authentic dress of Africa. As West Africans migrated to South Africa, the spread of factory-printed designs and tailoring techniques spread as well.

2.2 Viewing Factory-Printed Cloth

Not only have West African tailoring techniques and designs created from factory-prints spread to other parts of Africa, but also outside Africa to metropolitan centres such as New York,

Paris and Los Angeles. Rabine (2002); Mustafa (1996); Ross (1998) and Rovine (2001) all examine global fashion and the spread of African prints from the markets in West Africa into the hands of high fashion designers. Factory-prints can be seen everywhere from fashion runways, on the bodies of models and famous musicians, to home interiors where they serve as colourful complements, whether as curtains or throw pillows.

The role of factory-prints in contemporary African societies has also recently been documented in film productions. One recent film, *Mama Benz and the Taste of Money* (2002), was shown at the Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York 2002 and more locally at the Vancouver Film Festival 2002. The film chronicles the textile trade in West Africa and the involvement of Vlisco – the largest textile printing company. Hank Bremer, Vlisco’s regional director of Africa, and Alice Gouda star in the film. Gouda sells textiles in the Ouagadougou market of Burkina Faso’s capital and comes head to head with Bremer of Vlisco. In the end, both see how they need each other to achieve their goals.⁹

Nigerian born British artist Yinka Shonibare uses factory-printed textiles to deconstruct what it means to be African and European. Picton (2001:69), who provides commentary on Shonibare’s work, has synthesized it as follows: “Shonibare’s interest in using African print fabric remains primarily with their generic formal attributes as a hybrid and subversive outcome of a fortuitous late nineteenth century engagement between Indonesia, West Africa and a Europe intent upon colonial rule”. One of Shonibare’s better known pieces, *How Does a Girl Like You Get to be a Girl Like You?*, was first shown in the exhibit, *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex* in London in 1995. The work consists of three headless mannequins dressed in elaborate Victorian style gowns made from factory-printed wax textiles. Bickford (1996:76) called this work “powerful” and “rich in interpretive potential”.

⁹ A *Mama Benz* in Africa is the name for a woman who has acquired such wealth through her textile business that she can afford to buy a Mercedes Benz and drive about the streets of Ouagadougou, a true sign of prestige in West Africa (pers. observs. 1995, 2001).

2.3 Placing Factory-Printed Cloth in Museums?

Like anthropological discourses, museum collections and exhibitions have long been sites for the invention and display of essentialized identities. Though many of these institutions' collections include remarkable objects attesting to cross-cultural influence and exchange, such as indigenous carvings representing colonial officials and missionaries, such pieces have generally been marginalized or wholly excluded from displays and published discussions, which instead use material culture to evoke cultures ahistorically. (Thomas 2000:198)

Museum depictions of Africa have focused on "traditional" Africa and traditional has been translated into an Africa represented at the time of colonial contact. This is partly due to the fact that objects collected by colonial powers were placed in museums and came to typify Africa and perpetuate stereotypes of an Africa frozen in time (see Clifford 1988; Coombes 1994; Durrans 1988; Shelton 1997; Phillips 2002 and Price 1989).¹⁰ Thus, hand-woven cloth of Africa was placed in museums and came to represent various African societies as they existed at the time of collection. Much of the post-contact innovation in art and objects that emerged has not been included in the repertoire of traditional objects. These are not considered to be truly African as they were created during contact with Europeans (Kasfir 1999; Picton 1995; Steiner 1995).

Though factory-printed cloth has been an essential part of African culture for well over a century, it has been excluded from African textile exhibits until recently. This may be due to the fact that its production combines European technology with African designs and may therefore be considered inauthentic by some. Another reason may be found in James Clifford's essay "On Collecting Art and Culture" that includes a diagram labeled "Machine for Making Authenticity", that sketches out contestable fields of meaning for art and culture (Clifford 1988:224). The not-art/culture is the reproduced, the commercial, and tourist art and commodities. According to this diagram, African factory-printed cloth would not be part of the art/culture domain, as it is reproduced and is indeed a commodity. However, I will argue that factory-printed cloth is more

than just a mass consumed item; it takes its place alongside other valued cloth used in West African societies.

Factory-printed cloth challenges typified representations of Africa. While museums have customarily arranged their African collections and exhibits by regional or ethnic origin, factory-printed cloth defies such categorization.¹¹ African textile exhibits have represented the varied indigenous cloth types present throughout Africa, often demonstrating ethnicity through dress. However, this approach is highly problematic (Eicher 1995, Hendrickson 1996). Wearers of factory-printed cloth may be of any ethnic origin. What is novel about factory-printed cloth is that it renews opportunities for representing Africa, which is rapidly changing and where clothing documents the impact of culture contact and reveals attitudes toward change (Eicher 1980:v-vi).

While in Africa, factory-printed cloth may be used to express attitudes towards change, museum curators outside Africa may use the cloth to express other ideas. Factory-printed cloth has different levels of usage. Producers may not foresee the various meanings the cloth may acquire once it leaves the factory. Consumers and users apply their own meanings according to market trends and use the cloth to communicate in their own societies while also viewing the cloth as an investment. In contrast, museum curators abroad may use the cloth in museum settings to enter into discussions about authenticity, fashion and politics.

2.4 Exhibiting Factory-Printed Cloth

In the past ten years, collecting and exhibiting factory-printed cloth of Africa has been more frequent. One of the largest collections of commemorative African printed cloth is at the

¹⁰ There have been other exhibits that have tried to break this pattern (see Butler 1999; Canizzo 1991; Deliss 1990; Coombes 1994; Kasfir 1995 and Shelton 2003).

¹¹ While in Ghana, I met a Ghanaian woman who liked to wear the "Nigerian cut" which meant she liked to have her factory-prints tailored into a style that is associated with Nigerian people. However, women from other West African countries wear the "Nigerian cut" as it is a really popular style and can be worn by any ethnicity.

Newark Museum in Newark, New Jersey. Christa Clarke, Curator of Africa, the Americas and the Pacific, has recently reviewed the entire collection at the Newark Museum and may consider preparing a traveling exhibit (pers. comm. 2003). The National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C. has also acquired a recent collection and perhaps an exhibit will focus on this collection in the near future (pers.comm. Mary Arnoldi 2003). In Canada, recent research resulted in two exhibits on factory-printed cloth in 2004, demonstrating the increasing interest in these cloths. A review of the content of earlier exhibits will help to situate how the subject matter and exhibit methods have evolved.

One of the earliest exhibits of factory-printed cloth was curated by Anne Spencer in 1982. The exhibit, *In Praise of Heroes: Contemporary African Commemorative Cloth* opened at the Newark Museum of African Art, and was accompanied by a catalogue addressing the importance of factory-printed cloth in African society. Spencer had been a student at Makerere University in Uganda, from 1967 to 1968, where she first became aware of the existence of commemorative cloth in Africa. She saw people wearing cloth with the face of Obote, the prime minister, printed on it. "This use of cloth seemed to me at the time to reflect the emergent African nation's attempt to promote a sense of national unity in the face of the divisive tug of tribal ties" (Spencer 1982:3). However, when Spencer reflected on the cloth fifteen years later to assemble the exhibit, she came to realize that the use of commemorative cloth is widespread in Africa and is not only focused on promoting national unity.

The exhibit *In Praise of Heroes* displayed over 150 examples of factory-printed commemorative cloths from 27 sub-Saharan countries, with a large portion from West Africa. Spencer selected cloth featuring significant national or international public events and personalities which documented the process of nation-building in emerging African states from

the 1960s to 1980s.¹² Spencer's exhibit statement was, "To read these cloths is to catch vivid glimpses in microcosm of the diversity of contemporary African life" (Spencer 1982:3).

Spencer was the first scholar to draw attention to factory-printed cloth of Africa, specifically focusing on commemorative cloth. Spencer noted how the cloth is used to advertise events in African countries and to unite nations by the act of wearing uniform clothing on special occasions. Her research was not based on fieldwork but instead on collections of factory-printed cloth located in museums, and mostly donated by private owners. At the time, the early 1980s, it was very innovative of Spencer to have worked in this field of contemporary African material culture.

Later, Curator Clementine Deliss (1990, 1995) used factory-printed cloth to demonstrate contemporary African cultural art forms in the exhibit *lotteorthetransformationoftheobject* in 1990. In this exhibit, the cloth was used alongside other contemporary urban West African objects and in juxtaposition with Western artists work to open a dialogue between Western perceived notions of 'traditional' African art.

In 1995, John Picton addressed the complex history of factory-printed cloth in the exhibit *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex*. Kathleen Bickford (1996:73) reviewed the exhibit and believed the installation fought to dispel false assumptions about art and culture that are often articulated through terms such as "traditional" and "modern art", or "popular art", "high" and "fine art", and "craft". This, Bickford believed, was addressed in the first four rooms of the exhibit as well as the fifth and last room that contained factory-printed textiles intended for sale in Africa. However, Bickford comments that the fifth room was visually cut off from the others in that one entered the room as if it was a separate exhibit with its own entrance panel, something the other rooms lacked. The fact that factory prints were divided

¹²The commemorative cloths in the exhibit catalogue display pictures of political leaders, party slogans publicizing government or educational programs, or fashions.

off from the rest of the show is unfortunate, especially since Picton's aim was to challenge the term "traditional" in African textile exhibits by using factory-prints. Having the factory-printed cloth separated from the rest of the exhibit may have visually suggested to visitors that the cloth is still outside the realm of African textiles or transcends the category somehow.

In *The Art of African Textiles* there was no indication of how these textiles are valued and used and what they have come to signify in West Africa. *The Art of African Textiles* gave a general overview of factory-printed cloth. Block samples were displayed on the wall and there was a panel outlining their history. The samples had been brought in from various museum collections and private collectors. Visitors walked around a corner to come face to face with a wall covered with row upon row of factory-printed cloth ranging over a one hundred year history. A brief text explained the history of their origins. Design books from the Vlisco factory in Holland and ABC (European printing factories) were displayed in a waist-high case in the centre of the room, alluding perhaps to the producers' consideration of African aesthetic preferences. There was little discussion of the indigenous use of the cloth. The focus of this exhibit was on the history of these cloths. Even the catalogue mentioned little of their indigenous use.

Bickford noted (1996:76) that the installation of factory-prints barely skimmed the surface of a complex topic and concluded that "the time is ripe for a deeper consideration of this fascinating facet of African textile history". Bickford (1997) also wrote an essay for the exhibit catalogue *Everyday Patterns: Factory-Printed Cloth of Africa*, curated by Craig Subler. I am not aware if this exhibit succeeded in exploring factory-printed textiles more accurately than *The Art of African Textiles*. However, Bickford's essay in the exhibit catalogue does discuss the significance of factory-printed cloth and its use in African societies.

John Picton's (2001) commentary on commemorative factory-printed textiles in the catalogue for the exhibit *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa*

1945-1994, rectified what Bickford felt were his shortcomings of the 1995 exhibit by drawing attention to the historical significance and use of factory-printed cloths in Africa. For example, Picton discusses the “Sword of Kingship”, a cloth containing the design of an Ashanti sword. The sword was taken from the Ashanti King and placed in the British Royal Museum in 1896 when the British took control of Ghana, sending the Ashanti King into exile (Picton 2001). The sword still remains in the collections of the British Museum, while in Ghana it has been reproduced on cloth and worn by Ghanaians. This design is considered to be a classic one, perhaps worn by Ghanaians as a visual reminder that Ghanaians have not forgotten about their captured possession. Picton suggests that Ghanaians wear the “Sword of Kingship” cloth to quietly challenge and defy colonial authority (Picton 2001:230). This design is printed every year and dates from 1904.

This chapter has outlined various approaches that have been taken in relation to factory-printed cloth. The following section addresses the communicative value of factory-printed cloths in museum settings. Consultation and collaboration with West African peoples in relation to creating exhibits and the process of collecting and exhibiting factory-printed cloth will also be discussed, while reaffirming the authentic nature of these cloths.

CHAPTER 3: Exhibit Case Studies

3.1 Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration: The UBC Museum of Anthropology Collection / Case Study

Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration is the first exhibit to display factory-printed cloths acquired with the intention of exhibiting them. It is also the first exhibit to closely collaborate with people in West Africa, as well as at the local site of a museum. The collection consists of four major pieces that date from 1998 to 2001. Factory-prints are showcased alongside an *adinkra* and *kente* cloth in order to make a statement that factory-prints complement

other textile practices. They do not replace customary uses of these textiles, but provide other options of creative expression and continuance of textile practices. Like Picton, I view textiles as “social practices being handed on” (1995:11) and my exhibit reflects this viewpoint.

In the art world, factory, mass-produced objects may not be considered authentic. Their spiritual or cultural importance or value as objects may be doubted.¹³ Factory-printed cloths are highly valued even if they provoke questions about authenticity for Western viewers. The cloths have value through the artistic reproduction of symbols, images and text which complement and emphasize long standing value systems of communication through cloth. To Western viewers they may seem to be very "other" (i.e. not African), as if being produced in factories alienates them from the art/craft practice of people and their human creativity. However, that is not the case.

The art of wearing factory-printed cloths and women’s power to market, choose and communicate through these cloths makes these textiles highly cultural and charged with human agency, patronage, artistic merit, spiritual and aesthetic value.¹⁴ Designing these cloths and preparing them for the printing process is a highly complex process where extremely skilled textile artists and technicians work. Furthermore, the desire for these colourful cloths is shaped by the cultures’ artistic preferences.

By examining these textiles, an inside view of contemporary Ghanaian culture can be obtained. What is significant here is that mass-produced factory-printed cloths are not bereft of authenticity, value or even sacredness. The messages and information that can be obtained from

¹³ The debate of the authenticity of mass-produced art is nothing new. Artists like Andy Warhol changed the way we look at everyday life and he also challenged preconceived notions about the nature of art and the role of the artist. Andy Warhol said he wanted to mimic a machine. He said this about his technique of mass-producing screen-printed images of famous people like Marilyn Munroe and John Kennedy and others (Vancouver Art Gallery, *Andy Warhol: Prints and Drawings from the Warhol Museum*, June 05 – September 06, 2004). Though his art was mass-produced and he even called his studio “The Factory”, his work continues to be categorized as art. Factory-printed cloths also have this status. Their mass production is part of the art process.

¹⁴ Christopher Steiner (1994) states that “the realms of aesthetic, economic and spirits are inextricably intertwined in the “social life” of cloth in Africa and the analysis of such cloth cannot be adequately carried out unless equal weight is given to each of these three spheres of value”(Steiner 1994:66).

a well documented collection of factory-printed cloth and the resulting exhibit are numerous. In the following section I give details about each piece of cloth in the collection while providing the reader with ethnographic background from my research in Ghana. Then the process and content of the exhibit itself will be discussed.

3.1 (a) Methods

The MOA collection of commemorative factory-printed cloth under discussion in this section was acquired in Ghana, West Africa between April and July 2001, under a collecting contract with the UBC Museum of Anthropology.¹⁵ In order to obtain a visa to travel to Ghana I made contact with the Vancouver Consul of Ghana, Dr. Herbert Alsopp. Alsopp put me in contact with a local Ghanaian family that he recommended I speak with before leaving for Ghana. When I met with Joseph and Mary Frimpong, we discussed the project. The Frimpongs contacted family members in Ghana, who later assisted me with the project. Once in Ghana, informal research on commemorative factory-printed cloth began with trips to textile markets, printing factories and people's homes.

I visited printing factories such as Vlisco in Tema, Ghana and Akosombo Textiles Ltd. (ATL) in Accra, Ghana. I spoke with regional representatives from these companies and learned about their history in Africa and the design histories of commemorative cloths and their uses in West Africa. I wanted to collect commemorative cloth, but it proved to be a greater task than I thought it would be. First of all, I could see samples of commemorative cloths at the factories that had been printed in the past along with the date of their production. However, I could not demand that factories print these cloths for me to buy as they only print them in large quantities which are then distributed to markets around Ghana to be sold by market women. The sum for

¹⁵ The Museum of Anthropology has a substantial collection of textiles from West Africa. However, there were no factory-printed commemorative cloths in the collections which consist of textiles from Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Mali and Sudan (pers.comm. Elizabeth Johnson 2003).

me to buy a whole roll of this cloth would have greatly exceeded my collecting budget. Second, once some commemorative prints ran their time in the market, they were discontinued, so even if I was able to pay for the reprint, the textile printing companies wouldn't comply with my request. Third, I began searching in the markets only to discover that prints were time-sensitive. In other words, they were printed for an occasion in limited quantities to be bought and worn to commemorate a special event and then stored away.

My last resort was to ask around. As I was researching and volunteering in two museums in Ghana, the National Museum in Accra and the Upper Eastern Regional Museum in Bolgatanga, it was easy to make contacts. Soon I had various leads and willing people to assist me. After three months, I had collected four commemorative cloths, two of which were bought in the market, one from Manhyia Palace and the last from a personal contact. It was difficult to obtain commemorative textiles, as people wish to retain them as keepsakes of particular moments in their lives.¹⁶ Not only did I collect textiles, but other supporting documentation as well. Photos, interviews and objects that relate to the textiles all comprise the collection. The objects were collected along with the textiles to supplement and provide further context for interpretation.

I had no trouble finding a rich amount of information from the people I met in the field (see Appendix 2). Before leaving Ghana, I compiled enough documentation about each cloth to be able to begin to put together a working draft of my exhibit outline. In addition to collecting handouts and booklets related to some of the cloths, I obtained most of my information from discussing the cloth and related events with various people I met through the initial contacts I received from the Vancouver Ghanaian community.

¹⁶ This may explain why while in Ghana I was unable to acquire Kwame Nkrumah commemorative cloths from older Ghanaian women. While some women I spoke with claimed to have the Nkrumah cloth at home depicting a portrait of Nkrumah, Ghana's first President, they wished to keep this cloth as a souvenir of a period of Ghanaian history. One woman mentioned that after she left this world, her children would inherit her cloths.

Upon my return to Canada, I did more research in order to situate the textiles in a larger theoretical framework. An exhibit proposal was planned surrounding the field collection in which the ties to the local Ghanaian community were essential. After the proposal for the exhibit was approved by MOA, a date was set for the exhibit to open. Black History month (February) was chosen as the appropriate month to celebrate and acknowledge the presence of African-Canadian culture in British Columbia, and more specifically, the local Ghanaian community of the lower mainland. Two months before the exhibit was to open, some members of the Ghanaian community joined MOA staff members Curator Dr. Elizabeth Johnson and Exhibit Designer Darrin Morrison and myself at the Museum of Anthropology to see the collection and comment on the first draft of the labels. New ideas and insights were the result of this meeting.¹⁷ On February 22, 2004, The Museum of Anthropology hosted its first Black History Month community celebration, and the opening of the exhibit *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration*.¹⁸

3.1 (b) The Collection

The collection is based on four textiles that were printed in Ghana between 1998 and 2001. These textiles commemorate important events that took place during this time. The four textiles are Bill Clinton's commemorative cloth, John Kufour's campaign and victory cloth, and Ashanti Chief Otumfuo Opoku Ware II funeral cloth.

Bill Clinton's Cloth

In 1998, Bill Clinton, former President of the United States of America, visited Ghana. In Ghana, the image of Bill Clinton's face was printed onto a cloth, with the Ghanaian flag in the

¹⁷ The inclusion of an African fashion design catalogue was a result of this meeting as well as the removal of some statements from the labels that the Ghanaians felt were too generalized about their culture.

¹⁸ The opening was attended by members of the Ghanaian community and members of other West African groups. Those present were entertained by West African dance, stories and glimpses of various West African fashions which were worn by some people who attended the event, as well as the fashions on display in the exhibit.

background (see Figure 1). When this cloth was first shown to some acquaintances of mine, upon my return, it caused surprise and wonder. Why would Bill Clinton's face be printed onto a cloth and what was the purpose of this cloth? Why did I wish to bring back something like this for a museum collection and exhibit? Didn't I wish to bring back something more "traditional"?

However, the visit of Bill Clinton was an experience that many Ghanaians shared and which was marked by the production of cloth. This cloth now represents that experience. According to Brooks Robinson, Media and Public Affairs Representative for the United States of America in Accra (pers. comm. 2001), Ghanaians perceived Clinton's visit as a chance for Ghana to be seen in the world as a place with a vision, not a backwards and primitive place, but a developing and participating part of world action and history. This cloth embodies this moment. Clinton addressed Ghana from Independence Square, where Kwame Nkrumah, addressed Ghanaians years before. Thousands of people had come to witness this event. I had the chance to discuss the visit with Robinson as it was she who was responsible for organizing the press coverage of the visit. Robinson, a resident of Ghana, hoped the visit of such a high profile person such as Clinton would be a chance for the world to hear Ghana's story.¹⁹

Kufour's Campaign and Victory Cloths

The election of John Agyekum Kufuor, the current President of Ghana, reflected culturally established Ghanaian political election procedures. Office headquarters were painted the colours red, white and blue, the chosen colours of the NPP, New Patriotic Party. The campaign consisted of the usual posters, bulletins, stickers, buttons, street art and elaborately painted billboard signs along major roads; all are common aspects of a Ghanaian campaign procedure (Chazan 1999:68). Many of these political campaign billboards, some from as long as 20 years

¹⁹ However, the White House had another agenda, which differed somewhat from Ghana's, where Clinton would be in the spotlight of course.



Figure 1. Bill Clinton's Cloth displayed beside *kente* cloth in the exhibit *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration: Factory-Printed Cloths of Ghana*, at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, 2004. Photo: Michelle Willard, 2004.

ago, remain in place scattered throughout the country in even the remotest areas. On the outskirts of small villages in northern Ghana one can still see old party billboards from 1970. The picture and the name of the person campaigning is always there.

The campaign and victory cloths (see Figure 2) focus on the political culture in Ghana and are commemorative in nature and for our purposes here will be called “political cloth”. Political cloth reflects not only a people’s movement and right to expression, but also a cultural phenomenon that exists specifically around modern Africa’s political realm. I learned that political cloth is never worn again after an occasion for which it was made. Thus, buying this cloth to be worn only once is not something every Ghanaian can do for economic reasons.²⁰ Though the cloths are memorabilia for many, the buying of them is a luxury. Those who can buy the cloth revere these pieces and guard them carefully. To wear a cloth of a political party that is now out of favour would be a big taboo. Not only would you be mocked for doing it, you could end up in prison.

Because of the dynamism of African politics, a whole intricate culture of representation exists. The endless posters, street art and various other paraphernalia such as calendars, cards, bumper stickers, billboards and the bombardment of the media, GTV (Ghana Television) leading the way of many, create an explosive political scene that’s utterly dynamic. There is a sense of movement through time and it is invigorating compared to the static timelessness that Westerners have attached to objects of Africa. As a foreigner in Ghana I got a crash course in Ghanaian political history through cloth and other forms of media in my day-to-day activities surrounding the collection of the cloth. The exhibit itself reflects my contact with these other forms of media.

²⁰ Factory-prints are usually bought in 3 metre counts with which to sew complete outfits and can cost anywhere between 25 to 30 dollars US.



Figure 2. Kufuor's Cloths as displayed at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, 2004.
(note the fashion catalogue in the bottom right corner) Photo: Michelle Willard, 2004.

It wasn't difficult for me to get interesting photographs of the billboards and street art used during the election process, thus making a significant political commentary. The elections of the year 2000 made history in Ghana because it was the first time a constitutionally elected government handed over power to another constitutionally elected government.²¹ There were no riots, violence or acts of aggression to achieve this moment in Ghanaian history. Thus, the election of 2000, which resulted in the choice of John Agyekum Kufuor as president, marks a new period of democracy for Ghana.

The campaign and victory cloth make a beautiful pair and I was lucky enough to have met the woman who designed both cloths.²² Upon interviewing Amma Busia (2001), chairwoman of the NPP and woman's right's advocate, I discovered a bit more about the meaning of campaigning and the victory cloth, respectively.²³ Busia explained how the red, white and blue upon the cloth embodies Ghana's belief as a country. Yet it goes much deeper, as the red, white, and blue represents democracy for Ghanaians. "Canada, Great Britain, France, the US, colours for the West, because we share the same ideals and ideas as they, "freedom of movement, freedom of expression and we have chosen the colours to be in line with what we believe in." The text "*Asee Ho*" on the cloth is really interesting and is the slogan for the NPP campaign. *Asee Ho* means the "bottom line". Kufuor was often seen campaigning holding his hand up in a

²¹ This is what I was told by many Ghanaians interviewed (2001), and I also read this in the magazine *West Africa*, June 2001 and from watching the video "Inaugurating Kufuor" 2001.

²² There is no copyright ownership of this cloth Busia explained to me. "Here in Africa we take any opportunity to profit." It was indeed Busia who designed it, yet she told me how plenty of others copied the design and symbols and mass-produced it for their own profit. Busias' interpretation was that if it made them a little money to eat a better meal, why not. In fact, she said if people did this kind of thing she felt happy because that meant they liked it and it was free advertising for her. What must be understood is the extreme poverty and unfortunate situations that many Ghanaians and West Africans face. "Counterfeit", "copy", or "knock-off" textiles provide income for a meal or medicine for sick children and those who "counterfeit" textiles or designs rarely profit in comparison to the large textile producing factories. In addition, how ironic it would be to copyright designs that belong to, and are a part of, the cultural heritage of all Ghanaians? Some designs go back long before European textile printing factories set up shop in West Africa

²³ Amma Busia is the sister of the late Kofi Abrefa Busia, leader of the Progress Party (PP) which won the elections in Ghana in 1969.

first with his thumb pointed down. *Asee Ho*, the bottom-line. This was to show the voters where to make their mark on the ballot. In a country of mass illiteracy, Kufuor instructed voters that his party is *Asee Ho*, the bottom line on the ballot.²⁴

Ashanti Funeral Cloth

The cloth dedicated the Bill Clinton's visit and the campaign and victory cloths of Kufuor focused on political affairs. The funeral cloth (see Figure 3) was made to commemorate the death of the Ghanaian Ashanti chief Otumfuo Opoku Oware II. To the Ashanti, the chief is the core of their existence and is consulted on all matters of the state. The Ashanti king is often seen alongside the President of Ghana and acts as the traditional representative of the Ashanti people. Presidents always pay homage to the Ashanti king as he is politically powerful.

The cloth is red and black, typical for a funeral cloth in Ghana. Funerals are huge events where people spend lavishly and celebrate the life of the deceased. If there is no money for a funeral, people will borrow to host the funeral, as it would be a disgrace to not have an elaborate funeral. The text on the cloth "Otumfuo Opoku Ware II - 1970 to 1999" surrounds a photo of the late chief. A funeral was held for the chief in 1999, but the final funeral rites were held in 2000. This is due to the fact that the Ashanti do not hold the final funeral rites for a past chief until a new one is selected. Osei Tutu became the new chief in the year 2000, for which another cloth was made to celebrate the Millennium King.²⁵ The funeral cloth collected was not made until the year 2000, a year after the late chief's death. People had the opportunity to buy it and wear it to the final funeral rites or simply keep it as a remembrance of their past king.

²⁴ Shortly before the 2000 elections the government estimated the English illiteracy rate to be 53 percent (Temin and Smith 2002).

²⁵ I lent a sample of this cloth to the Textile Museum of Canada for the exhibit *Image Factories*, 2004.



Figure 3. The Ashanti Funeral Cloth displayed beside *adinkra* cloth at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, 2004. Photo: Michelle Willard, 2004.

3.1 (c) The Exhibit

The exhibit *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration: Factory-Printed Cloths of Ghana* provides viewers with information on Ghana's political history while highlighting the major significance and value of factory-prints in Ghana and in West Africa in general. How a society conducts political campaigns, votes and commemorates important leaders is revealed through this collection. The exhibit, furthermore, integrates the concept of fashion and politics. When Charles Agyeman, Secretary of the Ghana Cultural Association of British Columbia, met with me and other staff members at the Museum of Anthropology he said, "It's not everywhere that you can find politics and textiles mixed together." I would add that it is not often that we see politics and fashion mixed together.

Though factory-prints all originate in factories, their levels of usage, value and consumer trends differ quite significantly. I will outline some of these here.

Value: *Authenticity*

In the centre of the case, Bill Clinton smiles out at viewers. The gold, green and red coloured flag of Ghana surrounds Clinton on the cloth. A woven "gold dust" *kente* cloth is juxtaposed beside Clinton. As this cloth's colours compliment the colours in the Clinton cloth, the presentation is effective. On a label nearby I provide an historical background of the cloths and also state that; "Factory-printed cloths are seldom displayed in museum exhibits of African textiles, which tend to focus on hand-woven cloth such as *kente*, an example of which is the yellow patterned cloth displayed here. Though *kente* may be regarded by some as the 'traditional' or 'authentic' cloth of Ghana, factory-printed cloths are also culturally significant." The authenticity of the cloth is a major factor in the exhibit and it is demonstrated how the cloth is very much a part of the culture and that it is valued on numerous levels.

Value: *Spiritual*

The red Ashanti funeral cloth retains spiritual value although it is a factory-printed, mass-produced cloth. The symbols printed onto the cloth are sacred *adinkra* symbols. The most popular of the *adinkra* symbols is found on this cloth, the *gye name* symbol which means "Except for God, I fear none". The red funeral cloth of Otumfuo Opoku Ware II is displayed in the case beside a hand-stamped *adinkra* cloth. This cloth was selected to communicate how sacred symbols such as *adinkra* ones are transferred onto factory-printed cloths which are then used for one of the highest spiritual occasions in Ghana - funerals.

The location of purchase is significant to note here. Though this cloth is mass-produced, it was not sold in markets. I purchased the cloth from royal women outside Manhyia Palace located in Kumasi, which is the capital of the Ashanti people. It is, in fact, the elder women of the palace who design the cloth and who are responsible for choosing the new chief, as the Ashanti practice matrilineal kinship. That factory-printed cloth was chosen to commemorate a beloved chief who had passed away a year earlier, shows that the cloth is valued spiritually and that it fits into cultural practices of saying goodbye with cloth.

Value: *Fashion*

Picton, in the catalogue for the exhibit *The Art of African Textiles*, states,

A textile is a context of ideas and practices that is both prior to and not necessarily dependant upon subsequent usage (the use if cloth is often in conflict with its design as laid out by the artist). It is for this reason that although dress and fashion are topics that many would think should take precedence they were not selected as the dominant focus of the exhibition. Indeed, they are matters of such complexity that they must await another time. (Picton 1995:13-14)

I chose to address fashion in my exhibit.

In the exhibit I have displayed woven *kente* cloth, but on the label for this cloth I mention how, "*kente* may be worn by anyone who chooses to purchase this costly, highly-valued cloth. If

woven *kente* is beyond the average consumer's price range, factory-printed *kente* cloth may be purchased instead, a smart alternative for those seeking *kente* patterns on a budget". People value *kente* patterns and whether it is woven or printed may not always matter as much as the message being communicated. The benefits of choosing factory-printed *kente* cloth include the possibilities of tailoring it into a savvy outfit, and being able to easily wash it. Furthermore, men and women can wear the printed version of *kente* more easily to work and for other day-to-day activities. Woven *kente* cloth is quite heavy and cumbersome to wear all day if the wearer has many activities to perform at work and errands to accomplish around town. Wearers can instead wear the lightweight printed *kente* in the form of pants and shirt for men, or a skirt and blouse for women, and save their wrap around woven *kente* for special occasions.²⁶

Printed *kente* really has a dual function. When you wear printed *kente*, you are saying that you are proud of and encourage Ghanaian "social practices being handed on" (Picton 1995:11) and that you value *kente* patterns. By choosing to wear the printed form of *kente* in the various popular tailored forms of today you are continuing social practices while keeping up with the latest fashions. Friends I made in Ghana repeatedly asked me which pattern of printed cloth I would like to wear and which tailored style I would choose when we visited markets in Accra. One friend showed me her photo album full of photos of herself wearing factory-printed clothes and asked me which style I would prefer for myself.

Selecting cloth is just one of stages of fashion practices in West Africa. Finding a good tailor is essential to effectively shape your cloth into the latest styles in order to communicate the messages you wish to. While previous exhibits on factory-printed cloth did not address the process of tailoring cloth, I was sure to include this in my exhibit. I collaborated with local Vancouver tailor Kesseke Yeo. Yeo tailored a *kaba* (blouse) and *slit* (skirt) out of the campaign

²⁶ Women also wear pants made from tailored cloth but it is not as common in Ghana as in Nigeria (Bastian 1996).

cloth I collected to demonstrate how the cloth was worn in Ghana for the elections of 2000. Obviously the purpose of tailoring the cloth after it was collected was to demonstrate that these cloths are meant to be worn. The result is a stunning red, white and blue outfit with the NPP's party slogan and symbols on it. This outfit attracts the eye of many visitors. I also wished to avoid displaying the cloth on the walls of my exhibit as pieces of art, instead "bringing them to life" with a stunning blouse and dress suspended in the case.

Under the guidance of Mary Frimpong, I included a fashion design catalogue in the exhibit case. Yeo was born in Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa, where he was a tailor as well as a dancer with the National Ballet of Cote d'Ivoire. In Vancouver, he continues to practice dance, and to design and tailor popular fashion of West Africa. The styles his clientele carefully choose from these fashion catalogues demonstrate the global flow of fashion, through which African cloth and tailoring techniques travel to and from Africa.

Value: *Communication*

As outlined in previous sections of this thesis, women use the cloth to communicate various messages to the public. The cloth is highly valued for its communicative ability which goes beyond merely advertising and making statements directly through text and pictures or named patterns. By simply wearing well tailored garments of factory-printed cloth you are communicating to the public that you are a mature, well-established woman of good taste. You are telling people that you are up with the trends and that you value tradition at the same time. Of course, other messages may be communicated by wearers of factory-printed cloths and by curators who exhibit these cloths. I will now turn to the exhibit *Image Factories: African Cloth about Culture and Politics*.

3.2 Image Factories: The Textile Museum of Canada Collection/ Case Study

The Textile Museum of Canada's collections and research methods and resulting exhibit *Image Factories: African Cloth about Culture and Politics* differ substantially from the MOA collection and the exhibit *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration*. The TMC collection was "rediscovered" after lying untouched for several years in the museum's storage.²⁷ The cloths were put away until Allen took a second look at them and saw something he did not see before. He realized that the cloths told stories and if interpreted could make numerous social and historical commentaries. Allen curated an exhibit called *Image Factories: African Cloth about Culture and Politics* at the Textile Museum of Canada running from July 7 to September 5, 2004. The exhibit was 4000 sq. ft. and was indeed "eye-popping" as Allen assured it would be in his exhibit catalogue.

3.2 (a) Methods

Curator Max Allen, who has never traveled to West Africa, knew very little about the textiles when he began research on them. Most of his information for the production of the exhibit came from internet searches and collaboration with Sean Hawkins from the University of Toronto History Department and myself. Six months before the exhibit opened, Allen called me and I gave him some leads on research sources and some of my interpretations of the significance of the cloths including its inalienable qualities.²⁸ Two months before *Image Factories* opened, I spent time at the Textile Museum of Canada and provided research assistance on the cloths and proofed the labels.

²⁷ When Max Allen, co-founder of the Textile Museum of Canada, first glanced at these cloths at the time they were donated he did not like them.

²⁸ Others like Bickford (1996) and myself (2001) have picked up on factory-prints inalienable nature. The term itself comes from Weiner (1992) who pioneered the first social study of cloth and labeled some as having inalienable qualities.

Image Factories opened in the summer of 2004 and ran for two months with few public programs related to the exhibit. Unfortunately, there was little consultation with the local African-Canadian communities of Toronto. In order to make lasting contacts with community members in connection with museum objects, one should seek people who are knowledgeable and passionate about the objects and who work with these objects in their day to day lives. Making contacts with local tailors in Toronto and visiting cloth shops where the textiles are sold, or attending cultural evenings or contacting West African embassies could have also helped. The fact that Ghanaians in Vancouver were receptive towards my research demonstrates that factory-printed cloth is valued within Ghana, and that this system of value travels outside of Ghana as well.²⁹ Likely the same would be true for Ghanaians and other West African communities in Toronto, where the factory-printed cloth could have been the medium with which to open discussions between the Textile Museum and the various communities.

3.2 (b) The Collection

The collection at the Textile Museum of Canada grew out of the donations of three women who traveled and lived in various parts of Africa.³⁰ The collection dates range from 1960-1985 and reflects these women's time spent in West Africa and the events they individually experienced.

The factory-printed cloths at the Textile Museum of Canada cover a wide geographical range, spanning 16 countries of Africa. One aspect that's impressive and unique about the

²⁹ I don't know if I would have had the same response had I been researching masks for example, as those who have been raised in Vancouver may not likely have been so passionate about masks as they are with fashion practices that have definitely traveled from Africa to Canada in the global suitcase (Rabine 2002).

³⁰ Most of the collection came from Barbara Barde who lived there for several years and worked in radio. She is a television documentary maker and founder of Women's Television Network, Canada. Vicki Henry, an African craft specialist and now Director of the Canada Council Art Bank, also donated some pieces. Both women were interested in communications and were attracted to the cloth for its communicative value that they no doubt experienced first hand in context while living in Africa. Dorothy Caldwell, a textile artist, also donated cloth.

collection are the screen-printed *kangas* which communicate numerous messages intended for their East African clientele.³¹ A highlight of the collection is the “Family Planning” *kanga* (see Figure 4).³² Sperm and eggs swim in the background of the pattern on this cloth. Intrauterine devices and birth control pills line the borders and the stages of the moon, denoting a woman’s cycle are in each corner. To the left and right of the centre section of the cloth are condoms. And in the corners of the centre section are fruit and vegetables, chicken and livestock. In the centre of the cloth is a family of five, standing, holding hands inside a hut. The family is outlined by a blazing sun and they are wearing Western clothes. Two children hold books and all of the family wears shoes. Of course, the message is that if you plan your family, you as parents will have better opportunities, your children will go to school and you will wear western clothes including shoes.

“Sweetness has no comparison” is what another *kanga* reads in the Kiswahili language, with the words PEPSI-COLA written in the borders. The pepsi-cola logo is positioned in the corners of the cloth. This cloth is evidence of the existence of corporations which infiltrated the African market.

Besides the excellent collection of *kangas*, there are many colourful factory-prints mostly of West African origin. A very special cloth named “Unity is Strength” depicts a tree that is breaking, surrounded by a grove of trees and a Ghanaian proverb, DUA KUR GYE ENUM A OBA – “One tree cannot stand alone” or another way of saying it could be “united we stand, divided we fall.” Besides proverbial cloths there are many patterned cloths which all have intrinsic meanings attached to them by market women. Many other factory-printed cloths are commemorative in nature and depict political leaders of various African countries and events.

³¹ *Kangas* are worn by women as wraparound skirts.

³² Apparently the Toronto Star thought so too, as they chose this *kanga* to photograph and used it to illustrate their review of the Exhibit *Image Factories: African Cloth about Culture and Politics* in Cloth Medium’s Cultural Message Saturday July 31, 2004.

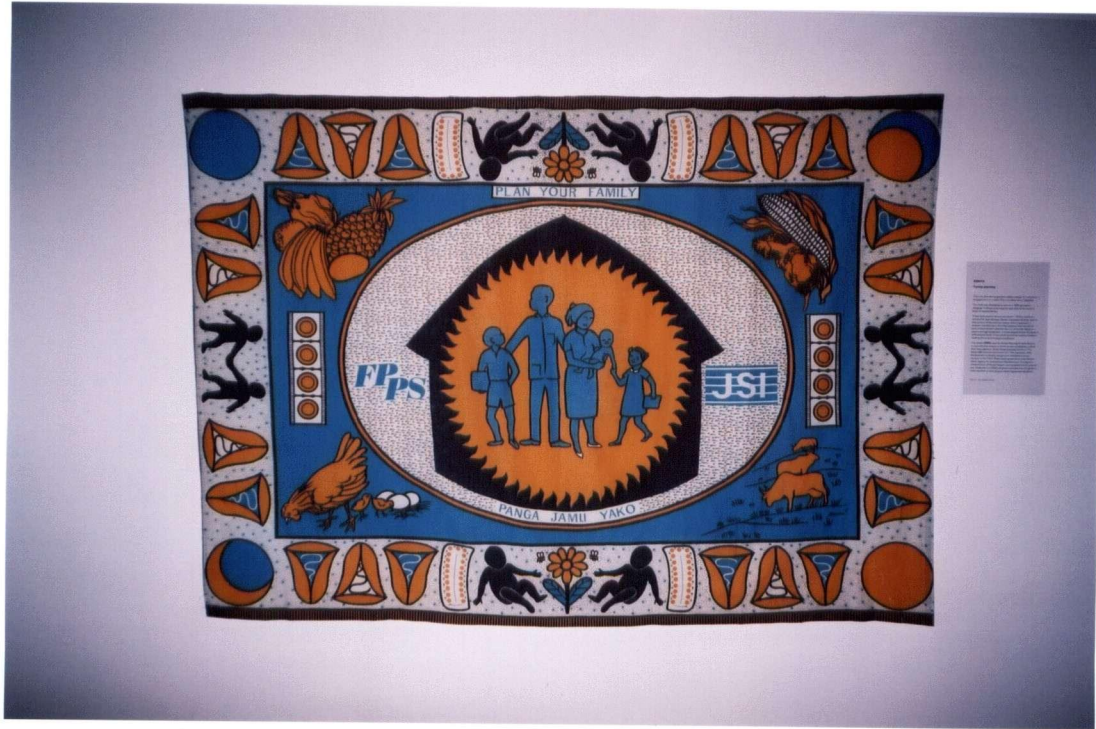


Figure 4. The “Family Planning” *kanga* – (Kenya). Collections of the Textile Museum of Canada. Photo: Michelle Willard, 2004.

3.2 (c) The Exhibit

Allen succeeded in demonstrating that factory-printed cloth is paramount in West Africa. His message (like mine) is that the cloth reflects modern Africa and is not quite what the public might expect. The first paragraph of his opening curatorial statement reads:

When somebody says “African Art,” you probably think of antique tribal masks and sculptures – the kind you’d expect to see in a museum. Here you’ll see something else, African art that is vibrant and modern. Factory-produced for a mass market. Art about political and cultural heroes. Festivals and Gatherings. Proverbs and slogans. Art about despots and idols.

From the beginning, the visitor is reminded that this exhibit is about modern Africa. Music played in two of the galleries in the exhibit. A visitor left a comment in the visitor’s book; “No African Music? I found the ‘other’ music to be a disrespectful note...” All the music in the first gallery was from the 16 African countries the cloth is from. In the long gallery, all the music is from Senegal, as is the cloth. As someone may have an idealized version of what African art would be – “antique tribal masks and sculpture” - which Allen claimed would not be seen in this exhibit, perhaps this visitor had an idealized form of African music in their mind.³³

Art is mentioned four times in Allen’s curatorial statement. The tendency to view and display cloth as art is a recurring theme in African textile exhibits. Allen displayed the cloths stretched out in their full rectangular forms on the walls in the exhibit *Image Factories*. Roda Graham (1992:2) states, “Africans tend to wear their art rather than to hang it on the wall”. If you are familiar with how African objects have been drawn into the Western artwork circle, you will begin to understand how textiles were drawn into this same framework:

African art studies primarily concentrated on sculpture and on the forms of sculpture pieces rather than their relationship to the societies in which they were produced...By the end of the twentieth century, African masks and figurative sculptures were less available, and consequently art dealers began to promote African textiles, ceramics, and other objects as artworks. (Arnoldi, Geary and Hardin 1996:8)

³³ Allen could have placed a label in the galleries in which the music was playing to further educate visitors about contemporary African music.

While *Image Factories* addressed the cloth's communicative value, little attention was placed on tailoring and wearing the cloth, or on the fact that it is high fashion. There was only one outfit displayed, but it was not a representative example of how women tend to wear these printed cloths. It was a *kanga* type cloth of Indonesian design, made into a dress with a v-neck and cut to just about the knee. Almost all the fashion outfits made with factory-prints are ankle or mid-calf in length. So, this fashion display was not an accurate one. Though there was a wall with many photos of women in their factory-prints and text about the "mama benz", display of a full piece outfit would have added to the exhibit.

Headings such as "Messages", "Manufacturing", "Modernity" and "Marketing" were clever ways to get across the main ideas Allen wished to communicate in the exhibit. In fact, "Manufacturing" was something that was especially prevalent throughout the exhibit. Various details of the how the cloth was printed to imitate real batik, such as crackle lines and spots being printed onto the cloth, or the deliberate mis-registration of colours was useful information for visitors. Other exhibits on factory-printed cloth have not demonstrated this aspect of the cloth before. Allen even displayed a "copy" of an original together on the same wall noting the differences. In the "Modernity" section of the exhibit, a whole wall was devoted to the display of factory-printed cloths which either reflected Africa's contact with the outside world or showed a modern side of Africa that Western viewers may not have expected. Electric fans whirred on one cloth while barber shears skimmed across another cloth leaving a different coloured pattern in its wake. Ticking clocks could be seen on one cloth, while people running in and out of doors, was seen on another. These cloths were very colourful and eye-catching and must be stunning when tailored into a blouse and skirt and worn around town.

Another section of the exhibit was titled "Precedents and Parallels". This section showed how designs and styles of factory-prints were influenced and derived from European's

involvement in the textile trade. Another section had excellent photographs of people wearing factory-prints and of cloth markets, and a map of where all the cloth in the exhibit is from. This helped to contextualize the cloth. Plenty of colourful, moveable stools had been positioned around the exhibit space and proved useful for visitors who could move them directly in front of the text in the exhibit. This was fortunate as there were numerous lengthy texts, which did not seem to deter visitors, as they were often seen sitting on stools in front of certain cloths reading the adjacent text.

Image Factories was a vibrant show, rich in information. Visitors to this exhibit could see numerous figures on the cloths, including Mandela, the Pope, Malcolm X, Mobutu and Jesus. If visitors took the time to pull up a stool and read about each featured person or event on the cloths, they would have come away with a detailed historical background on various African political leaders and Africa's struggles since independence.

CHAPTER 4: Wrapping Up Factory-Printed Cloth / Some Conclusions

“The politics of defining and representing Africans has more to do with the interests of those with the power to represent African cultures than it does with understanding the groups being represented” (Arnoldi 1997:71).

Though the above statement holds true for previous exhibits which reflect “nineteenth-century Western inventions of Africa”(Arnoldi, 70), today there are museum curators working on overturning outdated “Western inventions of Africa”. However, the statement above does remind us of the power museum displays and curators have in shaping interpretations of other cultures.

The two museum displays *Image Factories* and *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration* shaped interpretations of Africa. Both exhibits provide insights into modern Africa's political, social and cultural environments. However, in contrast to *Image Factories*, *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration* was developed based on a field collection and

research in Ghana. While *Image Factories* gave visitors a larger picture of various issues surrounding factory-prints in Africa and provided detailed historical backgrounds of numerous political leaders and events, *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration* shows visitors a concentrated study of a field collection of factory-prints of Ghana. *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration* locates the value and authenticity in these cloths while highlighting politics and fashion.

Both curators of *Image Factories* and *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration* had the power to interpret Africa through factory-printed cloths. In this case we may look back on Thomas' earlier statement that "objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become" (Thomas 1991:4). Curators such as myself and Allen chose factory-printed cloths to configure new representations of Africa. However, these cloths were not made to be used in this manner. Factory-printed cloths signify modern representations of Africa in museum settings, while within Africa they signify tradition. While in museums, curators use the cloth to challenge customary representations of authenticity in relation to Africa, the cloth was accepted as authentic dress in Africa long ago.

One way with which to overcome this discrepancy is to examine "African material culture" for display in museum settings, not as objects, but as entities imbued with social life. When factory-printed cloths are seen as intrinsic to the social life of a culture, their authenticity becomes clear. When viewing factory-printed cloths in this manner, the people surrounding the production, use and marketing of the cloth were not overlooked, as was demonstrated with the exhibit *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration*.

Collaboration was paramount in *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration*. The timing of *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration* coincided with Black History Month; it opened in February 2004 and the exhibit remained in place for one year. The collaborative efforts of both myself as curator of the exhibit and the local West African communities, have led

to several public programs, drawing large groups of visitors to MOA. A fashion show was held in correspondence with the exhibit, as well as further storytelling and drumming by the same performers who entertained guests on the opening day. Future research and resulting exhibits in the area of African fashion could open up more possibilities for collaboration between museums and the African Diaspora, as the exhibit *Wearing Politics, Fashioning Commemoration* proved.

As I have argued, factory-printed cloths are authentic representations of African material culture, are well integrated into contemporary social life, have rich communicative power, and are now accepted as appropriate material for anthropological research and for exhibitions. Factory-printed cloths are also an effective way to record or comment on history. In Africa, where illiteracy is common, and where television and radios are not present in everyone's homes, the cloths serve as an easily accessible method of communication. For the Ghanaian community in Vancouver the cloth serves to communicate their authentic identities and ties to Ghana. Factory-printed cloths of Africa reflect the dynamic, innovative and intriguing manner in which West Africans choose to commemorate their life experiences, events and memories. In museum settings, the cloths serve to communicate and to provide new representations of African people and their dynamic cultures, even if they provoke questions about authenticity for Western viewers.

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Appendix 1: History and Production of Factory-Printed Cloth

Textiles were being delivered to North African ports and rerouted by caravans to West Africa long before Europeans arrived on the coast. Cloth served as a principle trade item and was used as currency and as barter for slaves. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, English and Dutch East India companies were buying Indian cottons and trading on the coast of West Africa. During the seventeenth century, a trade struggle broke out between Indian producers of brightly coloured lightweight prints and European manufacturers of coarse linen in dull colours (Neilsen 1979). West Africans preferred the Indian textiles to the European ones, forcing the Europeans to change their medium of cloth, patterns and colours in order to compete with and eventually overthrow the Indian companies.

In addition to the trade struggle in the seventeenth century between the English and Dutch East India companies, where Indian cottons were in demand, by the nineteenth century Indonesian batik producers held a prominent place in the textile market. The techniques involved to create batik such as hand block printing were perfected in India and exported to Indonesia. African factory-printed cloth was created out of an experiment which was intended to overthrow Indonesian batik production (Picton 1995, 2001). By the late nineteenth century, the Dutch company, Haarlem Cotton, had perfected a duplex roller system with the goal of making factory-printed batik that would mimic the wax-resist batik methods done by hand. This is why they are called Dutch Wax or wax print today, though no wax was used (Picton 2001). Instead, resin was applied to the cloth to resist colour and then the cloth was printed on both sides. The Dutch thought they could sell this product to Indonesians and overtake the batik market, but they were mistaken. The Indonesians rejected this form of factory-printed batik due to the veining and spotting that occurred on the cloth when printed (Picton 2001:69). The Dutch tried endlessly to reproduce the original hand made batik and failed. Eventually, a shipment was sent to West Africa where the very qualities rejected in Indonesia caught the consumers' eye in West Africa.

A number of factories were established in Europe to keep up with the demand for machine made batiks (Neilsen 1979:470). Vlisco, established in 1892, is one of these companies that eventually became the largest and most successful textile manufacturing company catering to Africa. The Vlisco Group is now part of the international textile concern Gamma Holding, one of the largest textile companies in Europe and listed in the Amsterdam stock exchange (Vlisco Website). Printed textiles exported to Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth century were of two main types: wax prints (wax batiks) and non wax prints (fancy or roller prints). An African wax print is a printed cotton fabric of plain weave to which the design is applied on both sides of the cloth with hot wax, but today resin is used. Then the cloth is dyed indigo which leaves a blue pattern on a white background after the resin is washed out. Several other colours may be applied by hand blocking or special printing. Roller prints have designs applied on one side by engraved metal rollers (Ruth Neilsen 1979:468).

The technology used to produce these types of prints made possible the production of commemorative printed cloth, where pictures of important people or places and text could be printed onto the cloth. It was quickly learned that in order to market the textiles, African women would have to be consulted in regards to the designs, colours and patterns used. Europeans came to Africa to settle in the second half of the nineteenth century to establish the trade. By the mid-twentieth century, when African countries began to gain independence, the technology was transferred to West Africa, with the Dutch and English developing a textile-printing industry in most countries in West Africa (Picton 2001). Factories in Europe went bankrupt, leaving one company in the Netherlands, Vlisco, and another in England, Arthur Brunnschweiler & Co or (ABC). Today, Vlisco leads the way by far with eighty-thousand designs in use while ABC maintains fifteen thousand (Picton 2001).

Appendix 2: Key Consultants in Ghana in 2001

Eben Barima Agyapong field assistant, Accra, Ghana

Esther Frimpong, Host

Amma Bame Busia, First Vice Chairwoman of the NPP (New Patriotic Party)

Joseph Gazari Seini, Principal Conservator National Museum Ghana, Accra, Ghana

Mrs. Bridget Katsriku, Chief Director of Ministry of Employment & Social Welfare,
Accra, Ghana

Brooks Anne Robinson, Counselor for Public Affairs, Embassy of the United States of
America, Accra, Ghana

Ken Attafuah, Former Member of the B.C. Council of Human Rights, Canada, Present
Commissioner of Human Rights of Ghana, Accra, Ghana.

Lydia Korley and Steve Dutton of Akosombo Textiles Ltd. Accra, Ghana