The language of *Panos*: dress and fashion in Angola

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Abstract

This essay discusses the relations between tradition and modernity, individual and collective identity within the perspective of dress and fashion in Angolan urban spaces, particularly in Luanda. It addresses the printed cloth, or *pano*, not only as a daily worn item on the streets of Angolan cities but also as an important element for fashion design and in the work of Angolan designers, regarding an exercise of identity. Furthermore, the different uses and the rich decorative repertoire of *panos* are acknowledged, as well as their close association with the colonial involvement in Africa.

Keywords

African textiles, African fashion, Angolan dress, identity, printed cloth, wax-prints

Introduction

The art and aesthetics of African textiles and dress have long been admired by foreigners, especially European. Even though African textiles have influenced artists such as Henri Matisse and Paul Klee, scientific and more structured studies were neglected even by scholars and enthusiasts for the African art (WILLET, 2002).

African textiles have been the subject of much study for art historians and anthropologists during the last decades, particularly since the 1960’s. However, only recently the subject of fashion in Africa has given rise to a true interest and originated a few works on the matter. Some studies focus on the aesthetic value of African motifs, others on the anthropological approach to function and symbolism of decoration and even others are the result of the fascination for the African weaving and dying techniques. In fact, there are a number of published works on particular regions in Africa as well as general works about textiles of the whole African continent, but there is still a lack of studies about the particular flavour of
textiles in Angola.

The renovated interest for the textile art in Africa is unquestionably stated by recent exhibitions on the subject. Some of these are worth mentioning: in 2010, at the Tropenmuseum of Amsterdam, the exhibition *Long Live the President: Portrait Cloths from Africa* included 60 political cloths from the private collection of Bernard Collet, portraying African politicians and created as propaganda for commemorative dates; between 2008 and 2009, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, *The Essential Art of African Textiles* included pieces from the Museum’s collections along with contemporary creations by African artists. In 2007, the British Museum set up a commemorative exhibition on the 50th anniversary of Ghana’s independence. *Fabric of a Nation: Textiles and Identity in Modern Ghana* focused on the role played by printed cloths as an expression of cultural, social and political identity in modern Ghana. Even more recently, in 2011, several exhibitions clearly demonstrate the continued interest and excitement in African textiles.¹

The printed cloth (pano²) is for most people part of their everyday garments and accessories. It is also a valuable cultural good, playing a part during social or political occasions, such as weddings, funerals, fests and commemorative dates. It has stated a meaning beyond the functional source of dress and has served as generation, family and society ties and as the key to the construction of individual and group identities.

Umberto Eco says about dress that “the distinction between *to say* and *to fit* is diminute” (ECO, 1989). Dress expresses its meaning as it shows the individual’s important role in society. It also contributed to the birth of a tribal feeling or ethnic identity during the colonial period, i.e., to the construction of new dimensions of group identity. It is, simultaneously, the result of the need to imitate others and to distinguish oneself (LOMAZZI, 1989)

Textile, dress and fashion as a metalanguage and as a means of communication, particularly in urban centres, is the thread that runs through this work.
1. Printed cloth in Western Africa and Angola

Hand woven textiles represent African cultural heritage of the past, but the vibrant colours and diversified motifs of printed cloths evoke contemporary Africa. Despite not being as valued and acknowledged as the hand woven striped or dyed textiles, printed cloth, whose motifs are obtained by wax or resin resist, is undoubtedly the most popular and disseminated cloth in West Africa, used in men, women and children’s apparel, in skirts, shirts or dresses.

The origin of the wax-resist block printing technique probably occurred in China and spread from there to the Indonesia and Malay islands, through the Silk Routes. It is believed that the African taste for batik textiles dates back to the time when the Dutch recruited soldiers from the Gold Coast (present Ghana) to Java, during the colonial wars in the 18th century. On their return, the soldiers introduced the taste for the Javanese motifs created with the wax-resist technique (batik).

By the late 19th century, a Belgian engraver, J. B. Previnair, adapted a French banknote printing machine in order to apply resin as resist agent on both surfaces of the fabric. This technique was then modified with additional coloured areas applied with wooden blocks (CLARKE, 1997).

This technique was partially well succeeded. The resin cracked and fine lines of colour penetrated the motif. Whereas Indonesian consumers rejected the imitations, traders discovered a new market in the commercial posts of the Gold Coast. The imports of batik by Dutch merchants and Indonesian fabrics brought by African soldiers had already given way to the commerce of these cloths.

The irregular and cracked effect on cloths, which were regarded as defects in Indonesia, turned out to be regarded as essential features by African consumers and today they are thoroughly replicated in local factories (CLARKE, 1997).

Nowadays, mechanical prints produce industrial imitations very similar to and easily mistaken for the original techniques.
The introduction of direct printing techniques which produced cheaper imitations of the resin resist printed cloths, known as *fancy prints*, increased its popularity as a means of social promotion, individual propaganda or celebration of events. They are easily recognized for decoration is only printed on one side of the fabric enabling more detailed motifs and the reproduction of photographs.

Considering that printed cloths were especially produced for sale in West Africa, motifs were also adapted to regional needs and taste. Cloth industries hire designers who work in close relation with African traders, in order to infer preferences and taste variation regarding colours or patterns in the regional areas where cloths are sold. The same motif is frequently printed in different colours for Ghana, Nigeria or the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire). Every year, hundreds of versions or new motifs are created for traded cloths, following the taste and new trends, cultural and local influences, echoing everyday life, the moment and time context.

Since the independence of African colonies in the 1960’s, a number of African countries have founded their own textile industries.

Nowadays, only two European companies are able to compete with the local productions of the whole sub-Saharan Africa: the Dutch Vlisco (founded in 1846) and the British A. Brunnschweiler & Company, ABC (founded in 1908). They both pursue a policy of attraction and proximity to the market, the former with several stores in Togo, Benin, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo and the later with an important factory unit in Ghana and a wide distribution to the West African countries. Concurrently, these companies have established local partnerships and developed more attractive and cheaper brands to the African market, since the British and Dutch cloths are so valued they could cost about three times the locally produced ones.

Printed cloth may be regarded as a mass produced fabric to a mass clientele. Designers and printers are anonymous and, more often than desired, not even the production centres are identified. The fact that more and more Chinese and Indian companies have penetrated the
African market contributes to the difficulty in accurately identifying the origins of some of the traded cloths.

Printed cloths have become one of the most popular and disseminated forms of today’s African textiles. They are produced and consumed in almost every country in sub-Saharan Africa. They are closely related to the political and social life and acknowledged by their expressive and communicative power. Governments and political parties have made use of cloths to promote their leaders. Furthermore, there are examples of the use of printed cloths in the celebration of religious, community or family events, as well as an expression of everyday life. The decorative patterns convey signs of an individual’s political, social, religious and community life.

John Picton (PICTON, 1995) divided the motifs on printed cloth into five categories. In the first, he included the motifs which mirror the influence of the Indonesian batik with floral and bird patterns. He then referred to the motifs inspired by African proverbs. A third group included the motifs based on emblems and local symbols associated with tradition, authority or reproducing traditional hand woven textiles. The fourth group of didactic prints is very popular with a variety of motifs representing the alphabet, numbers or traditional musical instruments. The fifth group concerns commemorative prints, depicting individuals or celebrating events, as means of promotion and propaganda, such as politicians, national flags, political party emblems, social campaigns promoted by the government and advertisements of cultural or sport events. Religious prints can be added to this group, while celebrating an event, identifying a group or depicting images of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary. On Sundays nearby Luanda’s churches, groups of women exhibit religious printed cloths wrapped on their waists and on their heads.
A sixth group may be considered (CLARKE, 1997), which is represented by prints referring to technology and new gadgets or relating to women’s life: vinyl discs, CD’s, cars, motorcycle, miniskirts, electric shavers, lamps, television, banknotes and a wide range of accessories such as shoes or bags.

2. Colonial and post-colonial period: building a national identity

In Angola, as in other places in Africa and the world, the so called traditional dress faces strong competition from the western industrial clothing.

The use of traditional dress is more effective and popular in special ceremonies and events and regarded as richer and more elegant, among some social status groups. Another motivating factor for the use of traditional clothes is the fact that western clothes are deeply associated with colonialism.

During the colonial period, in Angola and particularly in Luanda, dress became discreetly a means for the Angolan’s urban youth to express their *angolanidade* (*angolanity*). The use of African pieces was encouraged and was even adopted as institutional propaganda.

In Angola, between 1940 and 1960, the action of the Liga Nacional Africana (National African’s League) and the increasing repression of the Portuguese colonial state against nationalist political activities, motivated a number of cultural practices among the young cosmopolitans in an effort to express their *angolanidade*. These practices and behaviour drove the youth to a decision-making process concerning dress, music and dance and to hesitate between the acceptance, the rejection and the introduction of European items combined with the *panos* (MOORMAN, 2004).

Until 1961, the system of *indigenato* (*nativeness*) of the colonial regime divided Africans of its colonies into two categories: the assimilated and the natives. One could be accepted as an assimilated if one was more than 18 years old, literate and spoke Portuguese, worked in any activity accepted by the regime, dressed like the Portuguese and professed to Catholicism. Hence, the European dress style was regarded as a sign of civilization.

Nonetheless, since the 1940’s and 1950’s, many youngsters adopted the fashion trends from Brazil and the USA, assuming their influences way beyond the Empire’s metropolis.

Wearing the *panos* was denigrated and seen as inadequate to urban life. Even in the 1970’s, the old ladies were the ones maintaining the use of the traditional dress. The *bessanganas*
could be distinguished when wearing the traditional dress, comprising four panos: the mulele ua jiponda is the undergarment; the milele ua xaxi is the cloth that crosses and covers the body’s upper part; the mulele ua tando, similarly crosses and covers the body under the waist (MONTEIRO, 1973). Finally, they wear a black cloth, known as bofeta, and a smaller headscarf wrapped around their heads. These pieces were worn over a long-sleeved shirt or a quimone (short blouse).

Simultaneously, the young women often wore miniskirts, headscarves, panos wrapped around their waists or to carry their babies, adopting the style which they considered typically Angolan and blending it with the European taste. It reflected a new local and cosmopolitan attitude. They were communicating their pride and wish to keep alive some cultural practices within a place that was at the same time Angolan and European. With no contradictions whatsoever, they assumed themselves to be the educated Angolans who were able to play an important part in Luanda’s urban life.

The changes on commerce and consumption of panos and traditional clothing are also related to the dynamics of Luanda’s evolution, to the urban and demographic growth, particularly after Angola’s independence in November 1975.

Most of the Angolan populations who were exiled in Congo / Zaire returned to Angola by the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, carrying a strong market culture and a taste for the daily use of panos, which motivated commerce and emphasized dress habits.

The neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Luanda, mainly inhabited by returnees (regressados), appeared in the 1980’s. It is not a coincidence that these are located near the most dynamic street markets in the trade of panos and imported clothing, such as the neighbourhoods of Palanca, Cazenga and Petrangol (DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP, 2009). The most dynamic markets in Luanda selling panos and clothing are Imbondeiro – Palanca, Asa Branca – Cazenga, São Paulo, Kikolo, Kwanzas and Congolese.

3. Panos in contemporary Angola: urban street fashion and traditional clothing

In contemporary Africa, both western and African clothes are worn daily, depending on the occasion or place and differing according to age and gender. For work or school, particularly amongst the youth, western clothes rule as the most simple, handy and practical. Nevertheless, on many occasions, they do not completely replace the African ones. When in contact with other cultures, even in a work environment, many Africans adopt traditional
forms of dress.

The pano can be used wrapped or tailored according to relatively well-known and widespread models, which circulate on posters exhibited at small tailor workshops. Despite the opening of boutiques that sell traditional clothing already tailored, there is still a preference among urban African customers for the work of tailors with small local workshops. Tailors not only make clothes but also a wide range of accessories, such as caps, bags, belts or houselinens with the same printed cloth. A gender pattern is perceived in this context since men dominate both the sale of cloth and dressmaking, especially in their own commercial place or in a business location on the street or local market.

Today, women in particular maintain the use of panos or seek a compromise between the traditional cloth and the European shirt. Men, in general, adopted the European style clothing, with the exception of a shirt made with printed cloth in some cases.

Printed cloths play a number of roles, with different functions. They can be used as baby slings to carry the babies on their mother’s back, put on the head as cloth pads, wrapped around the waist as a bundle or around the head, wrapped and loose fit as a skirt, put on the shoulder and even as a warming piece of clothing. In the context of urban dress, printed cloths are tailored in quimones (short blouse), bubus (long blouse or robe), skirts, dresses, men’s shirts and trousers. In women’s clothing, the pano is often decorated and garnished with lace, embroidery, ruffles, ruffs and pleats. It is used in combination with European style pieces of
clothing, wrapped around the waist with European style blouse or, the other way, the *quimone* or headscarf with jeans or other European trousers. The complete attire for women and men’s shirts are preferably worn on social or family festive occasions and on weekends. An exception is made on Friday when some people wear the colourful *panos* for work.

The *pano* is part of one’s lifecycle. It is offered to the baby after birth by one of the most important female members of the family and it would be the one chosen to carry the baby first. Later, other *panos* will be offered or bought throughout a woman’s lifetime and during special occasions. It is still valued today as a well-chosen gift.

During the *alembamento* (the official act preceding the traditional wedding) the bride’s family demands from the groom a variable number of pieces or *panos*, depending on the family and the region. The realization of the *alembamento* is established after the acceptance of the boy’s proposal by the girl’s family. Only then can the boy and his family present themselves at the girl’s home with the demanded goods.

In Luanda, the tradition concerning the *alembamento* is simpler and easier than in other provinces of Angola and can even be ignored. Nevertheless, if it is performed, the girl’s family traditionally demands three pairs of *panos* for her mother and aunts, as well as beer, soda, wine, whisky, amarula liquor, a suit for the girl’s father, flip-flops or sandals for her mother, scarves, the engagement ring and American dollars.

So, the Angolan woman inherits from her family, she buys her own and is offered *panos* by her husband, thus collecting a significant quantity of *panos* throughout her life.

4. **Angolan designers and the euro-afro style**

African costumes and textiles have a strong influence in fashion all over the world. They have been adopted and adapted by Africans in diaspora and by African designers working in
their own countries. Simultaneously, there is an increasing appeal for the most affordable and well-known printed cloth by European and American designer fashion houses. Such is the case of Balenciaga and Gucci who included printed cloths in their 2010 Summer collections and Gwen Stefani who presented her label L.A.M.B. at the New York Fashion Week in 2010 with a colourful collection of African-print motifs.

There is an increasing interest for fashion in Africa and for African originated fashion. This “glocalization” of fashion design and its promotion is expressed by a number of events, such as the Africa Fashion International in Cape Town and Johannesburg and by the Africa Fashion Week London, which presented its first edition in late August, putting together African and non-African designers who adopt wax prints in their creations. The Angolan designer José Rui Lopes participated in this London event with his brand Afrikanus.

African fashion designers have been exploring the potential of printed cloth as an identity and distinctive element of their work and as a cultural expression. Moreover, they assume a reaction to the fact that African textile culture is being adopted and redefined throughout the world. This dynamic may be defined as a new nationalism and fashion is redefining itself as an expression of individuality and identity in the global economy.

Following new demands of producers, creators and consumers, a large number of fashion events in several countries promote the collections of their own designers while showing the styles of other African designers.

Angola has been pursuing this tendency and the struggle of its designers to find a niche in the global fashion market. The birth of a fashion culture in Angola is also regarded as an expression of culture. Many Angolan designers have invested their efforts in the opening of stores, ateliers and showrooms. They also promote their creations in fashion events, such as the ModaLuanda, Angola Fashion Week, Huîla Fashion and the most recent Fashion Business Angola. Furthermore, there were several fashion events within the Triennial of Arts of Luanda.

Fashion Business Angola took place between the 9th and 12th of December 2010 in Luanda. It was the first edition of this important event with the participation of 35 Angolan and international fashion designers in catwalk shows, exhibitors and a debate on “African Fashion: its influences and international image”. The Angolan designers who took part in this major event were: Avelino Nascimento, Tina Souvenir, Nadir Tati, Dina Simão, Liseth Pote, Lucrécia Moreira and Elizabeth Santos. Africa, particularly Angola, was the inspiration
throughout most of the collections and favoured the use of panos combined with taffeta, satin, silk chiffon, lace and embroidery.

Tina Souvenir expresses her preference for the most prestigious Woodin (Ivory Coast) and Da Viva (Ghana) cloths.

Dina Simão, winner of the ModaLuanda trophy for 2009 Designer of the Year, states her Angolan roots as an inspiring note, pursuing distinctive model lines while mingling euro-African elements and turning to the panos to create contemporary models.

Elisabeth Santos is one of the first professional designers in Angola who has been working for more than twenty years. She was the first that made use of the traditional panos and recreated traditional clothing. She is even regarded by her peers as an authority concerning fashion in Angola and is a constant presence in the ModaLuanda.

The majority of Angolan designers regret the large number of imported clothing and accessories, despite this growing dynamics and increasing interest in fashion. They insist that the fashion market in Angola is static because clothing professionals are scarce and there are no textiles industries in the country to motivate clothing industries.

**Conclusion**

In Africa, textiles represent a mediator of cultural change and a mediator of social and economic relations.

African cloths and the traditional dress have changed towards the world of contemporary fashion and even beyond. They are sold in local and tourist-oriented markets and in boutiques to be used in dress and decoration, developing new ways of supplying the demands of an urban and modern elite and of a flourishing market of arts and decoration. Fashion designers and interior decorators have rediscovered, adopted and adapted African cloths.

A new element has emerged in the contemporary African world and that is fashion. The new
relation it represents between the individual and dress is partly dominated by production and market trends. The result is repeatedly the coexistence of traditional culture traits and fashion dictated culture traits. In urban areas, on the streets, the indiscriminate use of imported clothes is seen together with locally tailored garments.

In the urban spaces, the imposing western style dress contrasts with the blend of cloths (*panos*) and pieces of the traditional dress, such as the *quimones* or head wraps. New models are introduced, others adapted, but local styles are often distinctive, expressing the interaction between the local and the global trends.

During colonial times, especially in Luanda, traditional African costumes were regarded as an emblem of cultural roots and a means to stimulate national pride. While the struggle against the colonial regime evolved, the urban Angolans developed practices and dress habits associated with music and partying. Western style dress was the rule and was even encouraged by the increasing repression of the regime, whereas the young Angolans blended the European and the African, refusing the unfair distinction between the assimilated and the indigenous people and, at the same time, exploring African cultural traits to minimize an euro-centered identity.

The streets of Luanda burst with a wide variety of fabrics, colours, patterns and models. In Angolan towns, printed cloths coexist with other industrial fabrics of diverse provenance, exhibiting a combination of identity and difference.

Angolan fashion designers are exploring new ways of approaching traditional techniques and models in order to mingle them with their own contemporary styles, developing a syncretism between the European and American models and traditional African models. Understanding their work, their ambitions, attitudes and expectations towards the future of Angolan fashion may enable us to perceive the emergence of a culture of fashion in Angola and to sense the way it is, simultaneously, a sign of culture and expression of cultural change.
Notes


2. In Angolan dress, the word *pano* refers to a piece of fabric, usually wax-printed cloth, of about 2 yards length.

3. One should mention that, although cloths are known as wax resist, which means they are printed with wax as a resist agent, resin is actually the material most used for resist dying.

4. Wax resist dyeing, or wax *batik*, without the use of blocks in West Africa also made a veining effect on cloth. Paraffin wax was applied to the cloth with a sponge. The wax resist was crumpled before dyeing, thus letting the dye penetrate the design (GILLOW, 2001).

5. Even the well known Dutch company Vlisco produced in 1993 its last hand-printed cloth.

6. The term *angolamidade* was quoted for the first time in 1960-61 by the literary critic Alfredo Margarido when referring to the emergence of a literary movement in the 1950’s and 1960’s and to the new nationalist Angolan writers, with the following definition: “the Angolan national substance” (JORGE, 2006). In the context of this essay, the term is used to describe the effort to express identity, in the eyes of the new generations of Angolan people, with a double political and cultural foundation.

7. Initially referring to the women of Ilha de Luanda (Luanda Island), the term began to designate the native ladies of Luanda’s society (Cf. CARVALHO, Ruy Duarte de, *Ana A Manda, Os Filhos da Rede. Identidade colectiva, criatividade social e produção da diferença cultural: um caso muxuluandal*, Lisboa: Instituto de Investigação Tropical, 1989).

8. *Regressados* (returnees) is the name given to the Angolans of the Bakongo ethnic group (provinces of Cabinda, Úige and Zaire in Northern Angola) that emigrated to the Congo/Zaire, especially after the beginning of the armed resistance in 1961, returned to Angola after the independence in 1975 and settled mostly in Luanda.

9. The whole piece of fabric measures 6 yards. Each *pano* is 2 yards length, which means it is the third part of a piece of fabric.
Images


Page 4 – *Pano* (cloth), *Uniwax* (Ivory Coast), 2010 (Xénia Ribeiro / National Museum of Costume, Lisbon)

Page 5 – *Pano* (cloth), 2009 (Xénia Ribeiro / National Museum of Costume, Lisbon)

Page 6 – *Pano* (cloth) *MPLA*, 2009

Page 8 – Tailor’s workshop, Maculusso neighbourhood – Luanda, 2010 (Xénia Ribeiro / National Museum of Costume, Lisbon)

Page 8 – Woman, Luanda, 2009 (Xénia Ribeiro / National Museum of Costume, Lisbon)


Page 11 – Dina Simão, Fashion Business Angola, 2010 (Simon Deiner / SDR Photo)
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