

Introduction

Does changing an original material destroy its traditional context? If a material assumes new meaning or significance in a new context, is this inherently an appropriation of the object? What loss does this cause, and is it a positive change, a negative one, or neither? This lexicon revolves around African Lace. Through an analysis of this particular material, I broadly explain, craftsmanship, authenticity and reasons behind an object's creation, including why and how it is made, from which materials, and how the object translates into a specific environment. Various kinds of objects are created in and relate to specific places and time periods. If situated in an environment in which it did not originate, the meaning of an object changes.

In fact, the object is used from a new perspective. Although it is possible to reuse an object as a source of inspiration or research, it cannot be used as it was in its previous context. Thus, it is necessary to rethink the authenticity of an object when it is removed from its past context. History is important and can explain a materials origin, and it therefore warrants further attention. A lack of knowledge results in a loss of authenticity and originality of a historical material. In view of this, I develop this Lexicon to elaborate on the importance of this historical attention.

It is interesting to consider how an object can influence a user in relation to emotional or even material value. The extent of this influence is uncertain, but it is a crucial aspect since any situation could diminish the value and the meaning of an object. Taking an object as it is without changing it may be done for monetary purposes. For me disinterest in the original object is difficult to understand. If a person takes an object and reuses it because of its design, aesthetics meaning, or material, he or she is appropriating it, even if its true origin is unknown. In this lexicon I discuss the question of why we need to appropriate objects with a traditional context and reuse them in another context in which the original meaning is unrecognizable.

These questions are relevant to African lace, which has a long history of trade and has struggled to survive as a material. African lace is a worthy case to investigate in order to learn how a rich history of craftsmanship, intertwining cultures, innovation, and globalization has positioned it as one of the most important materials in the history of Nigeria. African Lace is an ideal material to demonstrate that development is imperative for survival.

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Adire

Adire is a tradition of indigo dyeing that emerged centuries ago in West Africa. Women from the Yoruba ethnic group in southwest Nigeria first developed the adire technique, which yields indigo-dyed cotton cloth and includes a variety of resist-dyeing techniques. However, by the end of the 1930s, quality problems had emerged due to the spread of low-grade synthetic indigo made by poorly skilled workers. This cheaply made indigo impacted the rest of the existence of the traditional adire. The low quality adire was easier to sell because prices could be less expensive, and production of the fabric consequently expanded. Therefore there was a higher demand for the cheap reproductions, and the traditional adire could not compete. For this reason, it was almost impossible to regain its early popularity.

Today, cheaper reproductions continue to cause the original adire technique to struggle to survive. Nonetheless, it is still a significant technique in the daily lives of the Yoruba group. Although there are unfortunately only a few adire makers left, a Nigerian artist named Nike Okundaye¹ established The Centre for Art and Culture in Nigeria in 1983. Okundaye grew up with the production of adire and gives lectures around the world to revive interest in the adire technique. In this aim, she has succeeded particularly well with a younger generation of designers, such as Amaka Osakwe, and offers some hope that the technique will experience a revival. Similarly, it is helpful that modern political figures including former U.S First Lady Michelle Obama and actress Lupita Nyong'o wear adire or adire-inspired clothing (see *appropriation*).

African Lace

African Lace neither originated, nor is fabricated in Africa. African lace is a combination of an entangled history that began with colonialism, trade, and appropriation between cultures. The term “African lace” is profound in its confounding quality given that the material is not lace and does not derive from anywhere on the African continent. It is a material that expresses globalization and represents the intertwining of cultures and communities, while calling into question perceptions of tradition and authenticity.

Despite this unexpected and surprising history, African lace is a traditional (see *traditional*) fabric that is worn prominently in Nigeria. The fabric has a long history of merging cultures and craftsmanship. For more than 50 years, the colorful industrial embroideries known as lace in Nigeria have defined the appearance of Nigerians worldwide and have become a central element of their festive clothing and fashion. The fabric is worn on many special occasions and conveys status. African lace is the traditional dress in many places in Nigeria but it is most famous in Lagos (see *Lagos*).

African lace is associated with color, quality craftsmanship, intertwining cultures, industry, lace, and embroidery. The fabric is of immense importance to Nigerians, who constantly renew the material with innovative ideas and designs. Therefore, it is an enduring material. The fabric plays a key role for Nigerians, as it signifies social status and wealth. The draping of the fabrics around the body is particularly significant, as it amplifies the wearer’s physical presence and enhances his or her social status. For example, stiff fabrics that lend a sculptural dimension to the garments are favored. There are multiple ways to signify status. One is the quality of the material, and specifically the level of detail with which the material was fabricated. It has generally been easy to distinguish well-crafted fabric from poorly crafted fabric, as only few countries have produced the lace, and consumers in Nigeria are highly familiar with which companies and regions reflect the best craftsmanship and skill. Another aspect is the quantity of cloth. The more items a person wears, the more he or she can project the importance of his or her status. Notably, items differ between women and men. For women, an outfit typically consists of three pieces: a tailored, close-fitting blouse, a skirt that extends to the ankle, and a head tie. All three pieces are made with the same material, color, and technique, and women can add the Iborun (see *Iborun*) to further emphasize their status. For men, the costume is composed of the *sakoto*: loosely fitted long pants and the *buba*, a waist-length blouse with long sleeves and a round collar. The collar features delicate, machine-made embroidery and a short button panel. The length of the blouse can vary according to occasion and personal taste. On official or special occasions, men can wear a robe over their pants and blouse.

It is not only the items that differ between men and women but also the color and patterns. For example, women are accustomed to brighter colors, and their fabrics have more extensive embroidery. The hierarchy of dressing in African lace is an important feature of this traditional costume in Nigeria (see *social status*).

Appropriation

What is the role of the reproduction in relation to artistic originality? All material objects are produced within specific contexts. However, it is interesting to consider whether African lace is an appropriated material. The origin of African lace can be traced back to Switzerland and Austria, where a European fashion was born through the appropriation of an embroidery technique of Turkish origin. African lace is a technique that has already existed for 60 years and is connected to two countries that seem drastically different. The embroideries from Austria are incredibly well crafted, and the fabric fits into the social structures, culture and climate of Nigeria. Over Time, a culture of meaning -not to mention an economy - has been built around the material and connects these two nations. The fabric is colorful, reflects status and wealth, and is compatible with the Nigerian climate. In addition, the culture there imparts a meaning to the material. For me, it is interesting and important to consider how the use and meaning changes when a reproduced object transitions into other contexts.

Over the last decades however, numerous producers in countries such as Turkey, China and Korea have attempted to reproduce the material and sell it in a lower price range. I believe that this leads to a devaluation of the well-crafted Austrian embroideries. Moreover, it also leads to shifts in the meanings for the material, not only through the act of reproduction and the use of different techniques but also because it disregards the particular conditions and interconnections that have developed over time to link these two geographically distant places. This ultimately has a negative effect on the traditional Nigerian-Austrian fabric and ignores the distinct history of this fabric.

Aso-Oke

Aso-Oke is a hand-loomed cloth that is a centuries-long tradition in Nigeria. Yoruba men and women weave this cloth with fibers that are either locally sourced or brought from neighboring states in Nigeria. Aso-Oke is woven in stripes and typically sewn together. Aso-Oke cloth has a variety of names depending on the type, texture and quality, but there are three traditional types; Etu, which is dyed a deep blue indigo with light blue stripes, Sanyan, which is woven from beige silk that is obtained locally from the anaphe moth; and Alaari, which is a magenta-colored cloth made from woven silk and locally grown cotton.

Through innovation and the development of modern techniques, production methods have reduced the weight and thickness of the cloth to yield more accessible wear. In the late 1970s, another wave of innovations in the production of these textiles resulted in the availability of a wider variety of colors. The introduction of imported Lurex yarn offered an attractive, modern alternative to Aso-Oke. Lurex became a massive success, and Aso-Oke textiles with decorative eyelet embroidery were in high demand (see *eyelet embroidery*). These constantly emerging innovations have allowed the material to remain relevant. It is now even more in vogue as a fashionable dress among an urban, educated elite, while at the same time this cloth is worn at traditional ceremonies as an expression of nationalistic Africanist sentiments.

Authenticity

The industrial embroideries that are discussed here have become an essential component of Nigerian identity. While the purchasing power of Nigerian customers has declined in the last three decades, competition from the Chinese, Korean, and Indian embroidery industries has increased. Nevertheless, producers in Vorarlberg and St. Gallen survive because of the high standard of their product. The high status that Austrian producers have maintained in the market can be attributed to their continual innovation and fine finishing as well as their sophisticated designs and strict quality control. African lace is a material that is popular in Nigeria because it is colorful, loud, light, and airy, which is appropriate both culturally and in terms of climate.

Why do people want to buy reproductions? I would argue that the popularity of reproductions illuminates the lack of knowledge among consumers of the origins of materials. It is crucial to examine the histories of materials in order to understand their value, and specialness of a material and how it has come into being. Why? This is necessary because a reproduction is produced under other conditions, which causes the traditional material that it copies to lose its context. Recently, I went to the H&M and saw a black blouse on which the designers tried to mimic the technique of African lace. To me this evidences that consumers can easily buy reproductions of an object that has immense historical meaning. Because of this cheap and “fast fashion”-orientated reproduction, consumers do not have an opportunity to realize the origin of designs (see *planned obsolescence*).

In the 1990s the embroidery reproductions produced in Asia were fabricated almost as expertly as the originals. Therefore, it was challenging to distinguish the original fabric from the reproductions. It was not until November 2000 that the national parliament of Austria took action and created the “Embroidery Support Law”, to combat cheap embroidery work from Asia and ensure the high quality brand of Austrian embroideries.²

In the past, embroideries made in Austria and Switzerland never had to attach a company label onto fabrics or packaging. However, in 2010 the Austrian embroidery business in Vorarlberg made a special security label to protect their clients and trademark. This label facilitates identification of the authenticity of the Austrian embroidery lace.

Broderie Anglaise

Broderie Anglaise refers to a technique that was most popular in the Victorian era. During this period, this technique was used to give a lace appearance to a variety of garments and frequently to achieve a more expensive appearance.

There has been speculations that this technique resembles earlier embroidery cutwork from Eastern Europe, especially Czechoslovakia, as well as Madeira work from Portugal. However, no direct connection has been traced from those possible sources to Broderie Anglaise. Even if it originated in Eastern Europe, this embroidery technique came to be called Broderie Anglaise because of its popularity in the United Kingdom.

As a style, Broderie Anglaise actually entails multiple techniques, which can lead to confusion which regard to its naming. Most simply, it is an umbrella term for techniques involving embroidery and cutwork. This term is often used interchangeably with eyelet embroidery or white work because of the common features and appearance of these techniques (see *eyelet embroidery, cutwork, white work*).

Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system that is based on free markets, credit creation, private enterprise, and ownership. Marxist social sciences initially introduced the term and concept of capitalism as an exploitative socioeconomic system. The term has spread through both its critique and its deployment against Marxism and socialism. The term was rarely used in the Western world during the ideological East-West confrontation of the Cold War, but became increasingly present in public discourse, in the following decades, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. Marxist theorists interpret the term “capitalism” to refer to a socioeconomic system or “mode of production” in which “capital is not a thing but a social production relation belonging to a definite historical formation of society”.³

Colonial Period

The British colonized Nigeria from 1900 to 1960, after which Nigeria gained its independence. Before this time, lace had not usually been part of the traditional clothing of Nigerians, and it had never been involved in the fashion or the culture of any ethnic group there. During Nigeria's colonization, Broderie Anglaise was highly popular in Britain (see *Broderie Anglaise*). However, the history of lace in Nigeria extends even earlier to the beginning of European trade, which started in the late-19th century. In the 19th century, Europeans used lace in many ways (See *lace*). When colonial officers and missionaries arrived in the region what is now Nigeria, lace elements were seen on their wives' dresses as well as on furniture.

In the 20th century, many Nigerian young people from financially privileged families travelled to Europe for further education and certainly came in contact with lace. Through this historical turn of events, lace became fashionable, and the foundation was laid for this material to become popular in Nigeria. However, African lace was only viewed as traditional after the 1960s.

Copy

A convincing copy can, in many respects, be equal to the original. In fact it can perhaps be even better, or we can learn from it by studying it in comparison to the original. Nevertheless, I find that a crucial consideration is the outcome of the meaning of an object when it has been copied – essentially, the role of the copy in relation to artistic originality.

Cutwork

Cutwork originated during the early Renaissance, when royalty from Western Europe, Scandinavia, and the British Isles highly valued cutworks from Italy, France and the Netherlands. The first cutwork was made with white cotton thread and white linen or cotton fabric (see *white work*) and its main use was to decorate handkerchiefs, collars and garments.

In the cutwork technique, a pattern is cut out from the fabric. The holes are then cut by hand with a small scissor or a scalpel knife. The pattern consists of oval and round shapes, which together form a floral motif. However, after cutting the pattern the fabric is no longer strong enough to wear. Therefore, in order to ensure that the edges will not ruffle or tear, they are reinforced with thread stitching called a buttonhole stitch. Once this stitching is complete the holes are stronger and have a more finished appearance.

Other works that incorporate this technique are: Broderie Anglaise, white work and eyelet embroidery. These techniques are all incorporated into the fabrics known as African lace (see *Broderie Anglaise, eyelet embroidery*).

Design

Designing patterns has been and still is a task of great responsibility; the significance of African Lace designs is that a single pattern can sell successfully for several years. This starkly contrasts to the fashion world today, where fabrics are easily replaced. Various designs of patterns in African lace are not merely for decoration but can in fact tell a story.

Designers in Lustenau, Austria and St. Gallen, Switzerland were specialized in designing embroideries for African lace. Interestingly, Austrian designers created all the patterns, yet none of these designers travelled to or spent time in Nigeria. Therefore it was always a risk if the new pattern would well receive by its audience. Because of the development of direct trade after the 1960s, Nigerian sellers came into better contact with Austrian designers and could communicate the exact wishes of consumers. (See *Lufthansa*) Within the designs it was important to find a good balance between base material and the embroideries. If too much material is visible, the fabric is considered 'too open' and too much pattern is considered 'too busy'.

The patterns of the embroidery could depend on the period. For example, during the era of the oil boom,⁴ figurative patterns became popular in addition to the previously typical floral patterns. Popular motifs during the oil boom were animals, fruit and everyday objects as well as prestige items such as high-heeled shoes, watches, logos of expensive car brands or airlines, dollar bills and Swarovski crystals (see *Swarovski*). Many modern-day patterns are more sophisticated, but their execution was more detailed in the 1970s.

Eyelet Embroidery

Eyelet embroidery is a main technique for African lace. The embroidery consists of the eyelet stitch, which resembles the buttonhole stitch (See *cutwork*). A circle of stitches is made from a common point, and by pulling the stitch, a finished hole forms in the fabric. Because of the stitch density, this type of embroidery was expensive. In the early 1970s the yarn used for eyelet embroidery was mercerized cotton, whereas cheaper rayon is primarily in use today.

In the early 1970s, multicolored eyelet embroidery textiles came into fashion in Nigeria; their main feature was bright colors aligned vertically, often resulting in a wave-like pattern. In the mid-1970s new designs of loose embroidered cotton voile with large hand-cut perforations became trendy. These textiles, which were called cutwork, were much lighter. The newer designs revealed much more skin and were therefore criticized as inappropriate in Nigeria. This concern led to a rethinking of appropriateness in the appearance of African lace, which eventually resulted in serious measures (see *Trade ban*).

Fashion Fusion

Cultures can inspire each other and transform into fascinating mixing of foreign and local dress styles. A close examination of everyday clothing and its country-of-origin labels could reveal surprises in terms of which countries are involved; for example, a single item, such as a shirt, could be imported from Italy, France, or the US but manufactured in China or Vietnam. Traditional outfits that have previously been made in their respective countries of origin may now be crafted from cloth that is produced in Asia and likely sewn there as well.

Today, it seems perfectly normal that clothes are produced like puzzle pieces from all over the world, and the resulting cultural links are still recognizable. As in the case of African lace, multicultural histories and entanglements characterize clothing styles, even those understood to be as “traditional”.

In countless ways, imported fabrics have assimilated into West African clothing traditions and have become key components of ethnic costumes that are commonly considered traditional clothing. Traditional clothing in Nigeria is assembled from a variety of sources, such as from a neighboring country, or even from another continent, as is the case with African lace.

In West Africa, clothing traditions are intrinsically linked with the global market. Therefore, the embroidered textiles from Vorarlberg, Austria that have been exported to Nigeria since the 1960s offer a perfect example of a recent chapter in a long history of cultural and economic global exchange.

Globalization

In the 1870s and 1880s, a British-influenced social life developed in Lagos. The Nigerian elite, mostly educated in England, tended to favor British food, engage in “cultivated conversation,” play music, and wear the latest European fashions. European dress was customary for festive occasions at this time, but when at home or in everyday life, a combination of European and African elements was preferred.

During this time, John Payne Jackson was an American-Liberian journalist who was influential in Lagos. Toward the end of the 19th century he was the editor and publisher of *The Lagos Weekly Record*, which was a critical and controversial newspaper at that time. He wrote in his newspaper that he was against the growing fashion statements of combining European and African styles, and this way of dressing was generally rejected out of anti-colonial convictions. In 1890, Mrs. Gibson, the daughter of an oppositional newspaper publisher, she saw the opportunity to introduce the unusual combination of an adire (see *adire*) wrapper skirt with a buba-like blouse made from a patterned European fabric, along with a headdress and a scarf. If you were an important figure in Nigerian social life, combining different clothing styles was a means to provoke and influence political statements. These actions could directly influence the import of British cotton fabrics, for example, which notably expanded rapidly as a consequence of massive promotion by British colonial policy. I believe that objects and materials from cultures near and far have mostly been appropriated and transformed into objects of one’s own – particularly in cultures with a colonial past (See *appropriation, authenticity*). African lace illustrates that the worldwide exchange of goods and ideas in addition to the possibilities of global communication and mobility do not necessarily result in the “McDonaldization” of the world; on the contrary, they may address the desire to articulate local or regional distinctions.⁵ This could lead to openings in the market that can be better served by small businesses, which are capable of more flexibility and adaptability than large corporations. Additionally, the contact between a smaller business and the buyer is more productive and concise. In view of this, Austria is a prime example of a massive economic success for a small country. Even today, it provides more than 60% of global embroidery exports.⁶ The ability of Lustenau, Austria (see *Lustenau*) to satisfy and adapt to the specific orders of buyers is thus immense.

The commencement of trade between Austria and Nigeria in 1960 was not by coincidence. Because Nigeria was a colony of Britain, and all trade occurred through British reign, direct trade with Austria was not possible. However, the independence of Nigeria in 1960 offered multiple new possibilities, and since Lustenau was seeking new markets, this presented an ideal opportunity for agreement.

The constant exchange of influences and ideas defines fashion and clothing traditions. It is interesting to consider the status of specific cultural traditions and aesthetics today in addition to whether cultural traditions still originate how they once did, what they signify, and how they are transformed.

At first, it was wholesalers in Nigeria and large-scale producers in Austria who dominated the transnational business. However, in the heyday of the trade, these groups gradually expanded on both sides. In Lustenau this resulted in increasing specialization in the so-called African business.

Iborun

The Iborun is an optional item for daily wear or festivities. The Iborun is a cloth made from the same material as the headdress. It folds over one shoulder, drapes over the lower arm, or wraps around the waist. Wearing this extra element indicates an ability to buy more fabric, which thus signifies high status. This specific piece highlights that there are numerous ways of wearing African lace to demonstrate status.

Industrialization

The Industrial Revolution started in the 18th century in England and spread to the rest of Europe and North America in the 19th century. The Industrial Revolution was an innovation in capitalism to outpace competition (see *capitalism*).

Industrialization resulted in higher production, which enabled popularity to grow. Although this growth was beneficial for the industrial embroidery industry in Austria and Switzerland, it sometimes made it difficult to acquire specific materials for fine embroideries. Therefore, the popularity of the product caused that qualities had to change. Cheaper materials, such as cotton, replaced the soft, high quality linen and silk. With this shift in material, connotations of the quality and value of the traditional fabric also changed: the material value and craftsmanship would transform into commercial industrial manufactures

Swiss embroidery emerged from the shift toward industrial-made embroidery. In 1855, Switzerland began manufacturing lace with innovative machines that could reproduce the embroidery more quickly. However, the machinery that was negatively impacted the hand-made embroidery industry. The chain-stitch machine, invented in 1855 was able to make the embroidery, which harmed the market for fine handwork.⁷

Still, handwork is critical for certain embroidery effects that cannot be achieved with machines, and evidence of hand-made embroidery was one of the detailed qualities that distinguished the top producers from other manufacturers. Austrian companies were highly effective in delivering material with a flawless finish.

Another substantial issue for the embroidery industry is modern computer technology. Now, designs are easier to copy and reproduce, so local embroidery companies must contend not only with price fluctuations for raw materials and changes in fashion trends but also challenges that result from growing global competition.

Innovation

Within the logic of capitalism and forced obsolescence (see *planned obsolescence*), innovation is essential to survive. Through a particular convergence of cultural contexts and historical circumstances the conditions developed for a viable market for African lace that continues in the present through the logic of innovation

One recent development in innovation is evident in the use of Swarovski crystals on the surface of the African lace (see *Swarovski*). At the same time, innovation is becoming even more challenging because of modern computer technology, which easily allows for the copying and reproduction of designs (see *industrialization, reproduction*).

Lace

Lace is a European invention that emerged during the Renaissance. It is a material that has been coveted, stolen and smuggled. In 15th-century Western Europe in countries such as, England, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, handmade lace was a valuable luxury to adorn the rich and nobility. The original materials for making it are silk, linen, and gold and silver thread. The purest form is needle lace, in which small stitches are created with only needle and thread. The needle lace technique can be distinguished into two groups, namely embroidery and cutwork. These two techniques are both important features of African lace (see *cutwork*, *Broderie Anglaise*). Lace was typically used as a surface decoration for clothing such as collars, cuffs, and blouse edges, and it was generally a way to display wealth.

The dissemination of lace in Europe arose from both the movement of people amongst nobility and intermarriages between royal families, which facilitated the spread of the newest fashion ideas. In the beginning of the 17th century, a high quality of lace was made across numerous key cultural centers of Europe, including Flanders, Spain, France and England. Therefore, it was critical for designers of lace to be innovative and original to distinguish their designs from those of competing lace makers in Europe. Innovation was one of the most necessary elements to differentiate one's design from those of contemporaries.

The diverse types of lace are divided into categories according to how the lace is technically produced or from which materials it is fabricated. These delineations are rather confusing, and it has therefore been difficult to distinguish between the various forms of lace. For this reason, lace is now a more generalized name for fabrics that use similar techniques.

Lagos

Lagos is one of the fastest-growing cities in the world. In 1975, it had a population of 1,9 million citizens, and today it holds 21 million. Lagos was the capital of Nigeria until 1991, and is one of the natural ports along the Atlantic coast. Eko, the native name for Lagos, was originally inhabited by the Awori subgroup of the Yoruba people in the 15th century.

Throughout out the history of Nigeria there have been a number of warring ethnic groups who settled in the area of Lagos. Following the early settlement by Aworu nobility and its inquest by the Bini warlords of Benin, the state first came to the attention of the Portuguese during the 15th century. Because of the city's advantageous geographical position, Portugal established a trading post for general goods and slavery. Lagos is named after a trading city in southern Portugal. In the early 19th century, Britain started to fight against the transatlantic slave trade, and Lagos soon became a colony of Britain. Subsequently, ex-slaves called Creoles from the West Indies, Brazil, and other parts of Africa came to Lagos. With the Awori group, European people, and Creoles, Lagos was a multicultural city. These aspects led to a fusion of fashion styles and became a aspect of Lagos (see *fashion fusion*).

Historically, lace was not originally part of the traditional clothing of Nigerians in Lagos (See *lace*); rather, British influences brought lace to the country. Infrastructural problems in Lagos affected the entire textile industry in Nigeria. Factors that may have been responsible for this crisis, and which led to the closure of several textile factories in Nigeria, were cheap, smuggled goods, high production due to difficulties obtaining raw materials, and high energy costs. A lack of political wills to support the industry was a further factor.⁸ By the late 1980's, there were 20 embroidery factories in Lagos with a total of 494 machines. The only embroidery plant surviving to this day is Supreme Lace in the Ikeja area of Lagos. However, Lagos and Nigeria are still the most important market for embroideries manufactured in Vorarlberg, Austria.

Lufthansa

Lufthansa and Air Swiss substantially impacted the growth of trade between Austria and Nigeria, as direct flights between the two countries made travel far more accessible. In 1962, Lufthansa introduced direct flights from Austria to Lagos and Johannesburg.

Lustenau

Lustenau is a town in Vorarlberg, which is a state in Austria. It lies on the river Rhine, which forms the border with Switzerland. Lustenau is globally renowned for its embroidery. For more than 200 years, businesses in the town have produced high quality textiles for the world market and famous fashion designers.

The embroidery industry in Lustenau particularly flourished between 1880 and 1928, at which point nearly all of its residents earned their living in this trade. By about 1928 Austria was already focused almost exclusively on exports and supplied as many as 66 countries, including distant lands such as British India, Morocco, the Dutch East Indies, the US, Argentina, British Africa, China, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Cuba and the British West Indies.⁹

In 1971, there was a so-called “African boom” in Lustenau. Regular appearances from wealthy Nigerian women characterized the local image of Lustenau. As a local explained, “money flowed like running water out of the tap” Vorarlberg and Austria together became one of the four global players in embroidery production and was the market leader from 1981 to 1983.¹⁰ The historical development of embroidery in Vorarlberg is a result of an interconnection of social conditions and chance – from technological progress and economic fluctuations to changes in fashion.

Material

Is the meaning of an object related to its material value or its cultural context? I believe that material can serve as a crucial layer to define the value of an object. This is clearly evident in African lace, a material whose value is intrinsically linked with technique design, and the performance of social status. When African lace is reproduced from another material it loses part of its intrinsic cultural context. Therefore, its value is determined through and with its cultural context.

Austrian companies started manufacturing first with cambric and then sateen. Labor-intensive materials for African lace, such as sateen, silk and linen gave the embroideries their higher value status, which was an important aspect to distinguish the original materials from the materials used in reproductions, which were primarily rayon and cotton.

Materials for embroideries demand constant renewal as new materials enter the market. Changing and adapting is important to satisfy the customers in Nigeria. The light finer cotton voile fabric that is still in use today was not introduced until the 1970s. In the 1980s, Lurex embroidery came into fashion, and polyester satin was a popular base material, sometimes with appliqué (See *Swarovski*). All-over embroidered cotton voile textiles gradually gained a foothold in the market and have remained popular to this day. Color combinations and embroidery patterns have changed since the 1990s; while vibrant colors were once popular, customers today prefer more muted colors.

“Obama” effect

The yellow lace suit that Michelle Obama wore to the inauguration of her husband prompted an increased demand for lace fabrics in pastel colors. In Lustenau and Lagos, this was called the “Obama” effect.

Original

When is something original? Originality is complex to define. In the case of African lace, the material has constructed its own originality through distinctive features, including good craftsmanship, tradition, and social value, and these characteristics together form a context for the material. It is possible that it is through such a confluence of many factors and conditions that originality of objects and materials arises.

In the past, companies in Lustenau did not need to mark their finished fabrics. Every company had a specialty, which was important to keep a secret. However, the embroidery style could reflect a company's signature features, and insiders recognized these immediately. Some producers are valued for their detailed floral motifs, while others are appreciated for their colorful geometric designs. Specialization allowed for differentiation between companies. Unfortunately this changed in 2012, once the Austrian Embroidery Association established "the new Austrian Embroidery security label." With this label clients can now check and identify and confirm the authenticity of Austrian embroidery, and these fabrics are protected as "originals" (see *reproductions, innovation*).

Planned Obsolescence

Planned obsolescence is hidden in daily life. Many people are aware of its existence but underestimate the extent of its effect. The term refers to a manufacturer intentionally shortening the lifespan of a product. Planned obsolescence drives consumers to continue making purchases. For example, electronic devices are produced to last for a far less time than is actually possible. Special technological features in phones, laptops, and tablets function for only a few years. Another example is apparent in the fashion industry. The reason that collections are designed twice a year is to encourage more purchasing; it is not because designers prefer to do this but rather that this is the expectation (see *capitalism*). For consumers, many aspects of our shared cultural and social spaces engender the feeling that we must fit in, and this desire to feel accepted or even cool drives a never-ending cycle of purchasing. Since 2014, the fashion industry has not had two collections a year but instead 52 “micro-seasons” per year. With these new trends emerging every week, the goal of “fast fashion” is for consumers to buy as much as possible, which results in the sensation that one is off-trend after wearing a product only once. Another aspect of planned obsolescence is that clothing quickly deteriorates, especially clothing from fast-fashion giants such as H&M, Zara, and Forever 21.¹¹

Power Dressing

Clothes are made to communicate information about the wearer, and they function as a sort of language that one can utilize to perform an identity. The context and material can provide pride and confidence in his or her place in society.

In the fashion world, the term “power dressing” refers to a way to dress that a person can use if he or she wants to assimilate or be taken seriously. Tam Fiofori has written about power dressing and explained it as a crime in fashion.¹² He also criticized the ostentatious presentation of wealth and social position of the Nigerian elite and questioned the status quo: why does a traditional fabric often guarantee access to power and a feeling of respect? Why are there rules about the way we want to dress? Why would only the elite or the people who can afford it wear African lace? There are subtle distinctions that mark status within African Lace and it serves as a visible indication of class differences. However, it is important to consider who is deciding this.

Reproduction

The industry understands Austrian embroideries to be manufactured with the finest detail. Therefore, Austrian lace was extensively preferred to that of Korea, China, and other regions that produced embroidery. Chinese and Korean producers were unable to achieve cotton voile; their fabrics were instead embroidered on polyester voile with polyester thread. Because of this, they were unable to compete with Austrian lace materials. Austrian embroidery was considered so well crafted because every completed panel of fabric was carefully inspected, and flaws were corrected by hand. However this outstanding effort increased the costs and accordingly made the end product accordingly more expensive.

After the 1960s, the popularity of embroideries from Lustenau continued to grow in Nigeria. Constantly renewed brightly colored materials were transformed into expertly crafted fabrics.

Slowly, African lace became interesting for fashion houses beyond Nigeria and specific production centers in Europe. Since the 1990s, the popularity of lace has led to a flood of Asian copies of fine Austrian and Swiss products in the Nigerian market. New production methods enabled relatively cheap, large-scale reproduction of materials, which became affordable for a much broader swath of consumer groups. Historically, producers in Lustenau focused on creating patterns with a timeless quality that could be worn for decades. Chinese and Korean companies entered the market and changed it dramatically by starting to make reproductions. In contrast with the goods of Lustenau producers, these reproductions were fashion oriented, made to last only a short period of time, and intended to be continuously replaced by new styles (see *planned obsolescence*).

Unfortunately, for several years now, the reproduced textiles from China and Korea are nearly indistinguishable from Austrian ones. The abundance of mass-produced identical or similar-looking items has advanced the importance of artistic originality and authenticity (see *authenticity*).

Today, the popularity of African lace leads to not only reproductions but also imitations of lace. Printed cottons with the appearance of lace that are sold under the brand names "Opulent Lace" or "Opulent Embroideries" can be purchased for one-tenth of the price of the real embroideries. Innovating imitations, such as prints with stamped-out holes to imitating cutwork lace, have also been attempted.

Social Status

Clothing is able to denote social class and status. For example, exhibiting one's wealth through dress became customary in Europe in the late-13th century. This option allowed people to distinguish themselves from others. Dress was recognized as an expressive and powerful means of social discrimination and it is capable of signifying one's culture, propriety, moral standards, economic status, and social power. Therefore, it became a powerful tool to negotiate and structure social relations as well as to enforce class differences. These differences are also a key aspect of African lace. African lace indicates social status not only through the composition of the fabric but also by the number of simultaneously worn pieces. While commoners were limited to one piece, the rich would layer as many as four while ensuring that the design of each was visible. These rules were set to align with logic of a social class system: a system of multilayered hierarchy among people (see *sumptuary law*).

Labor-intensive materials, such as linen and silk, create expensive distinctions in dress that mark status. This is true for African lace as well, as some lace techniques are cheaper than others, and the amount of embroidery directly reflects the value of the fabric. Owning and wearing cloth of high quality is a sign of affluence and prestige and can convey a family's wealth, social standing and reputation.

Sumptuary Law

This law was intended to identify social rank and privilege, which could be utilized for social discrimination purpose. This law was an attempted to regulate appearances that accompanied the slow but inevitable increase in consumerism. As fashion became more accessible, the possibilities of competitive consumption increased.

As a concept, sumptuary law has been found throughout Europe, through mostly in England, Italy and France. Although it traces back to antiquity, it proliferated rapidly during the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The regulations focused on rank and clear hierarchy and specified appropriate apparel for each social class.

Sumptuary law intends to regulate consumption for many possible reasons. For example, it can regulate the balance of trade by limiting the market for expensive goods. Additionally, it could determine which clothing could be worn to signal differences in social class. Distinctions could include, the length and width of the garment, the use of particular materials, the colors and decorative elements, or the number of layers in the garment. Today, the law is less concerned with apparel restrictions and more focused on public decency and jurisdiction clothing or other visible signs of religious or political opinion.

St. Gallen

St. Gallen is the capital of the canton of St. Gallen located in northeastern Switzerland next to the border of Austria. This region was once the largest and most important export area for embroidery worldwide. In the 15th century St. Gallen became known for producing high quality textiles. The origins of eastern Switzerland's machine industry are closely connected with the embroidery boom towards the end of the 19th century.¹³ Because of this upturn the canton of St. Gallen developed into one of Europe's strongest industrialized regions at the turn of the 20th century.

Today, competition and the prevalence of computer-operated embroidery machines have sharply reduced the textile industry in St. Gallen. Fortunately, the embroideries for which this area is known are still popular within designs for Parisian haute couture.

Swarovski Crystal

In the 1970s, designers in Austria added another effect to the fabric: the use of Swarovski crystals. Swarovski is an Austrian company that is famous for its crystal. The crystals have a special luster due to the lead in the glass, which causes them to shine brightly and have an expensive quality. Initially, these stones were attached to the material with metal claws. However, for a more complete design, Swarovski developed a new technique. Specifically, it invented stones that could be placed directly on fabric with an adhesive, which enabled the use of smaller stones. Furthermore, the number of stones became an indicator of the price.

Most of these new influences originated in fashion houses in Europe. In 1975, embroidered organza was the newest material in the Nigerian market. The Nigerian chief Obebe made the first order of the expensive hand-cut organza with Swarovski crystals because he was a man of a high rank, Austria did not know if the new product would succeed in the Nigerian market. Development was risky, but it would also be rewarding if it would eventually succeed. Attempting to go against the favored open-worked industrial embroideries, which were preferred in Nigeria, needed a lot of courage. Eventually, the applied crystals became an essential feature of modern-day African lace.

Trade

Because Nigeria was under British colonial rule for the first half of the 20th century, the trade of lace materials had to proceed from Austria to Nigeria via Britain (see *colonialism*). However, Britain's colonization of Nigeria ended in 1960, and Nigeria became independent. Shortly thereafter, a number of rapid developments impacted trade arrangements. In 1962, Lufthansa (see *Lufthansa*) introduced direct flights between Austria and Nigeria, which facilitated trade between the two countries. In 1962, an Austrian Embassy opened in Nigeria. Direct contact between Nigeria and Austria offered advantages for all parties, as it improved communication regarding quality expectations and color preferences of Nigerian customers. Furthermore, it generated more awareness among Austrian producers of how consumers used the fabrics. Companies had to carefully protect trade secrets, even from their colleagues, in order to maintain their position in the market.

Between 1978 and 1985, the market structure shifted. Small-scale traders increasingly travelled to Austria and started to import embroideries themselves. The embroidery business was doing very well, so more small producers in Lustenau and the surrounding area entered the market. This led to a counter-reaction from Nigeria through the imposition of import restrictions (see *trade ban*).

In Vorarlberg, 205 embroidery companies with approximately 400 machines currently export 98% of their production, most of which goes to Nigeria.

Some firms cater exclusively to this West African market, while others also serve the underwear industry and the international fashion market. Almost no textiles for home decoration are produced anymore; these are now manufactured mainly in Turkey and East Asia.

Trade Ban

Trade bans are commercial and financial penalties that one or more countries can apply against a targeted country, group or individual. They may include various forms of trade barriers, tariffs, and restrictions on financial transactions. The purpose of a trade ban could also be to strengthen local industry and preserve the country's foreign exchange reserves.

The so-called "indigenization decrees" started in 1976 and generally banned the import of industrial embroidery textiles to Nigeria. Part of the impetus for the ban was the government concern over the "reckless and outrageous designs" that exposed and revealed too much of the body. While this obviously had a negative impact on the Austrian embroidery industry, it did not prevent Austrian lace from entering the country. The profit margin was still high enough that businesses could easily absorb occasional losses, even with the potential for impounding of goods.¹⁴ Still, it was not without consequence, and people could be arrested in Nigeria on suspicion of smuggling the laces into the country.

The trade ban heavily affected business relationships between the two countries, so those involved in them had to find ways to continue production. The ban was established because lace was a luxury good, and the federal government believed that businesses in Nigeria could produce it for Nigeria and its citizens. The quality of Nigerian-made embroideries was generally lower than that of Austrian ones, but the interest in developing the local industry provided improvements and plans were made to produce 2,000 meters of embroidery fabrics per day. At the time of these changes in the industry, producers in Vorarlberg held a 40% share of the market. To complicate matters further, one of the difficulties for the local embroidery industry was that many of the raw materials had to be imported, and some of these were also affected by the import ban.

In 1977, the Austrian embroidery industry had to pressure the Austrian government to fight for the remission of the import ban and repair a balance between exports from and imports to Nigeria. The import ban persisted for a long time, but numerous attempts were made to continue providing Nigerians with industrial embroideries from Lustenau. For example, lace was delivered to the Republic of Benin and could then enter the Nigerian market from there.

Traditional

Tradition is generally understood to be that a group or society holds and which has a symbolic meaning or special significance, with origins in the past. Furthermore, tradition can often manifest as a belief, a behavior, or in the way people dress, and it can demonstrate gender, age, status, and affiliation with local, regional, and ethnic communities. Moreover, clothing can convey identity, beliefs and values. With clothing, a person can express who he or she wants to be or demonstrate his or her importance, and these performances of identity can be either individual, collective, or a combination of the two.

In Nigeria the use of lace was easily adapted for traditional use. Designs in multiple colors and shades provided a variety of choices for social groups that wanted to distinguish themselves from other parties. Since the 1960s, lace has had an important traditional role in Nigeria, and marriage ceremonies would not be complete without their appearance. However, this traditional wear did not entirely originate in Nigeria, as the lace is usually produced in Lustenau, Austria (see *African Lace*). Fabrics are significant in Nigerian culture and are a major aspect of its traditions, as evident from the examples of adire and Aso-Oke (see *adire, Aso-Oke*). Colorful embroidery designs and traditional fabrics fit well in Nigerian culture. Therefore, it is almost unthinkable to see a Nigerian person at an important event but not wearing African lace. This form of dress became Nigerian's cultural identity and is consequently considered as their traditional wear.

Wanyosi

Wanyosi is a Nigerian deluxe name for luxurious embroideries. Cutwork embroideries, applique, and Swarovski crystals attached to the fabric are characteristics of Wanyosi. This embroidery became a symbolic of a segment of society that lived off of the profits of the oil boom.

White Work

White work refers to any surface embroidery technique in which the stitch is the same white color as the fabric, from this, the term “white work” was conceived. The white work technique is embroidered on garments, collars or handkerchiefs and is typically made of white linen. White work focuses on texture and contrast; the stitching must also be white to impart a desired shadow play on the fabric. Today, the term is used for any color with a stitch that is the same color as the foundation fabric. White work was an important early technique that originated in several countries in Europe and which served as an inspiration for African lace.

Conclusion

A remaining question is how a material can be created in a European city and then labeled as African lace. Another reason to highlight this product is because its reproduction began only after it became popular. As a result of long trading histories between Austria and Nigeria, which fused their qualities to yield a well-crafted product, African lace is a product of a multilayered creative process of trade, craftsmanship, and tradition. Wearing the lace can serve as a visible indication of class differences. An individual's manner of dressing is of immense importance in Nigerian culture. When cheaper manufacturers copy and reproduce the fabrics, the context changes, and the message underlying the entire outfit is misunderstood in other cultures. Such connotations will cease to exist if the fabric is worn in another culture. Although this is not the most critical point to address it is concerning that the cheaper labor of the reproductions may change the meaning given that material is a key layer of self-expression. The importance of African lace designs is that a single pattern can sell successfully for several years. This is in stark contrast with the fashion world of today, where fabrics are replaced easily and the duration of one product is not particularly long.

For me, it is hard to understand that a material, which has many layers, including social value, traditional value, and also an economical value, totally loses its meaning when a person can buy a cheap rip-off at the H&M. It is concerning to me that people do not realize that can cause long-traditional crafts to become extinct. I think it is important to increase awareness of materials and objects that we can buy in our daily lives, because cheap reproductions can cause the extinction of long-existing crafts, and the meaning of the original will slowly change until we only can see it in a museum.

This material expresses globalization and the intertwining of cultures and communities while simultaneously calling into question perceptions of tradition and authenticity. The collaborations and relations that made African lace a material of this standard are essential to the material, and reproductions lose the understanding of the significance of the material. I think this is a critical realization. The reproductions contradict the original material, and for this reason I think that it is important to inform oneself of the historical facts behind a material and to prevent the loss of crafts due to cheap reproductions. Therefore, the authenticity is also crucial for this traditional material.

¹ www.nikeart.com

² Barbara Plankensteiner, Nath Mayo Adediran, *African Lace: A history of trade, creativity and fashion in Nigeria* (Paperback 2010)

³ Marx, 1952; Chap. 48, English trans.; first published in 1867

⁴ The oil price shocks of 1973-74 and 1979 resulted in a large transfer of wealth to Nigeria.

⁵ Christian Feest, director Museum of ethnology Vienna, *Foreword - African Lace*

⁶ Barbara Plankensteiner, Nath Mayo Adediran, *African Lace: A history of trade, creativity and fashion in Nigeria* (Paperback 2010), p.96

⁷ Catherine Amoroso Leslie, *Needlework through history: an encyclopedia*, (greenwood publishing group 2007), p32

⁸ www.allafrica.com

⁹ Barbara Plankensteiner, Nath Mayo Adediran, *African Lace: A history of trade, creativity and fashion in Nigeria* (Paperback 2010), p. 113

¹⁰ Barbara Plankensteiner, Nath Mayo Adediran, *African Lace: A history of trade, creativity and fashion in Nigeria* (Paperback 2010), p. 97

¹¹ Elizabeth L. Cline, *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion* (penquin group USA 2012)

¹² Tam Fiofori, Crimes of Fashion: Gaudy “Power” Dressing, in *next on Sunday* (23 August 2009:37)

¹³ www.stadt.sg.ch

¹⁴ Barbara Plankensteiner, Nath Mayo Adediran, *African Lace: A history of trade, creativity and fashion in Nigeria* (Paperback 2010), p. 60