

# Patterns in Circulation

*Cloth, Gender, and Materiality  
in West Africa*

NINA SYLVANUS

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## Patterns in Circulation

**pattern** |'padərn|

verb [ with obj. ]

- 1 (usu. as adj. **patterned**) decorate with a recurring design: *rosebud patterned wallpapers* | *violet-tinged flowers patterned the grassy banks.*
- 2 give a regular or intelligible form to: *the brain not only receives information, but interprets and patterns it.*

(**pattern something on/after**) give something a form based on that of (something else): *the clothing is patterned on athletes' wear.*

ORIGIN Middle English *patron* 'something serving as a model,' from Old French (see **PATRON**). The change in sense is from the idea of a patron giving an example to be copied.<sup>1</sup>

The serial number of one of the most iconic African wax-print patterns is 14/0663. This classic design features a series of concentric circles speckled with indigo blue and white dots that create a glistening sun effect. The central pattern is surrounded by small, interspersed dark figures that resemble a network. With the contrasts of blue, orange, and red, the radiating circles create a pulsing visual effect. They capture the eye and pull it toward the center blue disk, a centrifugal pattern that is in tension with the active, intersecting network that surrounds it. The pattern is vibrant and dense; pulsing and radiating with energy like the sun; it has an agentive quality, and when women wrap this “sunray” cloth around their bodies, or tailor it into a two-piece outfit, it becomes fully animated (see plate 2).

This type of wax-print fabric is an essential consumer item in West Africa and beyond. In francophone West Africa, this cloth is referred to as *pagne*.<sup>2</sup> It is central to women's clothing and self-making practices, but it is also used in men's shirts and sometimes pants. Pagne is part of the transfer of wealth from a prospective groom to his intended wife prior to marriage or the inheritance a woman leaves for her daughters. Women who collect cloth and garments accumulate two types of wealth that anthropologists have long recognized: moveable wealth, which constitutes a category of objects that are thought of as portable and reserved for women's economic circulations, and what Annette Weiner (1985) calls "inalienable wealth," a concept that illustrates the inseparability of person and object once they are connected through gift, exchange, and memory.<sup>3</sup> The lightness and malleability of the cloth make it popular for baby carriers, diapers, shower towels, market ground cloths, and picnic blankets. A polyvalent term, *pagne* denotes both the cloth or pattern that women purchase in six-yard-long units in the market and the cloth worn on the body itself. In Togo, which until recently was the hub for trading and working the value of this type of cloth, it is often said that a woman's life can be read through the pagnes she accumulates over the course of a lifetime. Similarly, it is possible to read the history of African independence through pagnes imprinted with nationalist symbols, presidential effigies, or party politics (see Picton 1995; Bickford 1994; Spencer 1982). Pagne cloth constitutes a form of archive, where intimate memories are stored, held in reserve, and always ready to be reanimated with life, story, and sensuous materiality. The cloth as archive can also absorb national memories in its capacity to record events and global connections that forge national identity.

Each *pagne* has a name with the ability to broadcast images about power and politics, beauty and wealth, or about the joyful and complex relations between men and women. "Sugar" or "Morceau de sucre" (sugar cube) is a case in point. "Do you want to add some sugar to our relationship?" is the teasing subtext of this classic geometric pattern, which women like to wear and talk about in Togo. Another, more recent, print is called "Le sac de Michelle Obama" (Michelle Obama's handbag); it is also known as "LV" in reference to Louis Vuitton (see figure 0.1). This pattern speaks to women for its alluring name and print aesthetic, which features a series of smart handbags adorned with frangipani flowers. To wear this pattern, an Ivoirian friend explained, is both to honor and to aspire to be ravishingly beautiful and powerful like Michelle Obama; it is considered a must-have fashion piece in the wardrobe of stylish women in Abidjan, Lomé, and Lagos.<sup>4</sup>



0.1 “Le sac de Michelle Obama.” Photo by Vlisco.

Wax cloth stands out for its bright colors and iconic patterns that range from abstract, geometrical, and floral patterns to objects such as fans, roller skates, lipsticks, and cell phones.<sup>5</sup> Pagne is at once perceived as traditional and modern, classic and cutting edge, and it is sensuously deployed during special events and for everyday wear. Patterns that are considered classics—such as “Sugar” or 14/0663—have special aesthetic and economic value. Six yards—the standard length required to make

a woman's outfit—of the 14/0663 design costs about \$65, although its market price can skyrocket when supply is scarce and the pattern is in demand.<sup>6</sup> Known by a variety of names such as “Target,” “La Cible,” “Disk,” “Record,” or “Plaque-plaque,” 14/0663 has long-standing currency as an investment and fashion piece in West Africa and beyond. It even found its way into Burberry's 2012 fashion collection.

Ironically, this type of printed cloth, which has become so iconic of African chic and women's sartorial styles in West Africa, was long produced in Europe exclusively for African markets. Before entering the exquisite fashion circles of Burberry, Agnès B., and Gwen Stefani's L.A.M.B. brand, and prior to the pattern featured as 14/0663 in the “Classics Collection” of the Dutch textile manufacturer Vlisco, various iterations of this pattern were already circulating along the global trading routes of Empire—namely, those trade networks that linked the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) to Europe via the trading forts of coastal West Africa. Vlisco currently claims exclusive rights to the pattern and attributes its origins to a 1936 design made by its drawing department. However, Vlisco was not the first Dutch company to produce the iconic pattern. 14/0663 was already a copy of a pattern that another Dutch manufacturer had been producing since the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> But this is not where the peculiar story of copy and appropriation of the sunray pattern ends.

The radiating print aesthetic of the pattern offers several visual clues into the twists of the story. Returning to the layered and contrasting composition of the pattern, it is possible to see how elements of both repetition and irregularity organize its dazzling visuality. While the blue-orange disk imagery repeats across the cloth and creates an appearance of symmetry, each disk has a unique signature. Upon closer inspection, we can see that several elements thread its visual form and give it dimension. First, a series of small white dots of different shapes and sizes appear unevenly across each disk; second, streams of tiny veins crackle through the pattern. These visual characteristics imbue the cloth with a distinct materiality and instant recognizability; they also provide traces of its production techniques as well as insights into its many different points of origin and assemblage. The white dots and small veins that speckle the cloth result from the wax-resist batik production process by which individual layers of wax (resin), dye, color, and image are printed onto the cloth. The crackle-veining effect results when the dye bleeds through a crack in the wax or resin. When done successfully, the cloth creates an irresistible sparkle that captivates the eye.<sup>8</sup>

This type of wax-printed fabric was originally forged by Dutch colonial companies attempting to copy handmade Javanese batik cloth with

the goal of selling it back to colonial subjects at a cheaper price than traditionally handcrafted designs. When the project of selling machine-made imitation batik to the colonial markets of Southeast Asia failed, the Dutch began selling the cloth in West Africa with much greater success. This time the Dutch did not simply copy West African printing techniques. Instead they used a mechanized Javanese wax-resist printing and dyeing technology to copy patterns found in West African textiles. Indeed, 14/0663 features the same circular repetitions with uneven radiating streams that West African tie-dyeing creates. And this brings us back to the iconic sunburst pattern. A global assemblage par excellence, it mimics the visual detail of West African tie-dye cloth but expresses it with a colonial-era process that was an innovation of Southeast Asian resin-resist printing.

Wax cloth is complex; as a threefold material, visual, and textual-archival object, it exists in interaction with human agents who make, trade, and wear it. Its techniques of production are hybridized, and its aesthetic origins are mobile. It is the uniqueness of this cloth as a hybrid material object—at once Javanese, Dutch, West African, and now increasingly Chinese—that is at the heart of this book. Wax cloth's deep history, its aesthetic innovations and cultural significance, its ability to transmute value and transform bodies, as well as its material presence across space and time, make it an interactive and agentive object. It is not enough to tell the story of pagne cloth as the global history of a thing in motion, cutting seamlessly through global flows and circuits of capital, human labor, and imperial interests (see Beckert 2014; Mintz 1985). The visual, material, and semiotic density of cloth—what I refer to as its *dense materiality*—renders it irreducible to a single thing, pattern, or theory.

In the folds of wax cloth's dense materiality we see the historical and contemporary making, unmaking, and remaking of relations between people, things, and the institutions that govern them. I call this process *patterning*. Patterning encapsulates how historical, technological, and cultural efforts that interweave the body of cloth create an effect of potential disarray and imperfection—like the crackle and dazzle of 14/0663—when we zoom in on the materiality of cloth itself, and yet enable more regular abstractions to emerge when we zoom out to a broader political-economic scale of trade and production. From the most intimate sphere of the dressed body animating and being animated by cloth to the making and unmaking of markets, value, and the (Togolese) nation, unfolding cloth's dense materiality and its changing characteristics reveals West African, and specifically Togolese, histories of capitalism. Because the dense materiality of cloth renders it suitable for commoditization in the context

of mass trade flows, as well as fetishization in a Marxist sense, wax cloth exposes the hidden patterns of global capitalism.

To understand the significance and impact of new economic regimes that are arriving in Africa and how market futures might unfold, we need only look at the long trajectory of wax cloth, its intellectual content and processes of value creation, and the colonial ideologies and gendered practices woven into it. This requires, however, thinking beyond the “brute materiality” (Tilley 2007, 17) of things, which means extending the details of the material object to the urban fabric of markets and the various processes of value and identity making with which they are interwoven.<sup>9</sup> In this book, I show how the composition and circulation of objects are intertwined and complex with agency, affect, and semiotic power. In so doing, I chart how the cloth’s different qualities and agencies—both human and nonhuman—mobilize people and things on the one hand, and consequently shape political, economic, and gender relations on the other.

The stories and narratives that make up this ethnography were collected between 2000 and 2010.<sup>10</sup> These stories connect various sites that indicate how far wax cloth has traveled—the colonial archive, the postcolonial era of nation building, and the current neoliberal moment. Drawing upon archival research, fieldwork, interviews, and oral history, I follow how wax cloth is made and printed, how Dutch designers imagine African aesthetics at a distance, how wax cloth is copied in China, and how the fabric travels to and arrives in the West African port city of Lomé. My ethnographic account reveals the real-world predicaments of trafficking in such culturally valued things and explores how these values and objects are situated: in the shops of the women traders in the Lomé market and the parking lots where bales of cloth are repackaged for illicit border trafficking; at the free port where containers are transferred and sometimes confiscated; in the Visco United Africa company store, where women compete for fabrics and the favors of the so-called neocolonial director; on Chinese factory floors where Togolese traders assist textile engineers perfecting copies and the right bundle of textures; and in the tailor shops where the cloth is transformed into real garments. I recall the trace of these other zones of production (for the meanings and values of *pagne*) in the public and private spaces, where the dressed body achieves a sense of immediacy when women’s bodies are evaluated and set into motion. Across these spaces and places, this ethnography explores not just how people *make* and *remake* themselves through the dense materiality of wax cloth but also how cloth and people animate each other and



are entangled in deep cultural, economic, and political patterns that are not easily undone.

## Women and Cloth Shape the Nation

Located in a seemingly marginal place and dealing with an unusual object, this ethnography challenges us to think from West Africa into the world and back again. The setting for this story is the small entrepreneurial nation of Togo and the Lomé Grand Marché (Assigamé), once the largest market for wax prints in the region and a lively commercial frontier zone. Situated on the Gulf of Guinea between Ghana on the west and Benin on the east, Togo's coastline is a mere 35 miles long. It is one of the smallest countries on the continent, a narrow strip that stretches roughly 350 miles north from the coast to Burkina Faso and with a population of about 7 million. What makes Togo such an interesting place is its long-standing position in the region as an economic frontier and center for capitalist commodification via everyday consumer goods, especially cloth. The reasons for Togo's varied commercial frontier zone statuses are both historical and geopolitical. Over the past fifteen years Togo has become an entrepôt for Chinese goods in the region—mostly knockoffs—and thus a new economic frontier for Chinese capitalism, placing Togo within a new economic and political phenomena known as China-in-Africa.

Togo historically has been a space for frontier capitalism. In precolonial times, the Togolese coast was entangled in the economies of the transatlantic trade that linked West Africa to Europe and the New World. As a slave-trading hub, the town of Aného was a site of capitalist extraction and abstraction where bodies were commodified and exchanged for cloth.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, cloth was once an alienable value, a universal equivalent against which the value of things as diverse as salt, gold, and slaves were equated across the Sahara and the Atlantic coast. When Togo came under German colonial rule, and later French authority, Togo's commercial frontiers and the state's ability to move and tax everyday consumer goods was what made it such a profitable and valued colony. Situated on the border with the British Gold Coast (contemporary Ghana), Lomé was the only frontier capital in colonial Africa and a vibrant site for cross-border trade and trafficking in such culturally valued things as imported gin and cloth. Both were formative goods in the imperial and colonial penetration of African markets, but the cloth/fashion frontier was

a specially charged one. Because cloth works on and through the body as a crucial frontier between self and society, cloth is an especially powerful site for creating identity and value. Europeans capitalized on the polyvalent nature of cloth, using it as both an economic and a political tool to fashion colonial subjects and markets (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Allman 2004).

Of course colonial subjects were also fashioning themselves. In Lomé, a group of women cloth traders cleverly produced themselves in and through the colonial situation and its many frontiers. Entrepreneurs *avant la lettre*, they inserted themselves into the restrictive retail structures of colonial trading companies for whom they took on leading marketing roles in the distribution of everyday consumer goods, including wax prints. Working the value of cloth across urban and rural markets and channeling wax cloth across regional borders, these women dressed physical bodies and new consumer subjectivities. Along the way, they helped fashion the Togolese *entrepôt* as an increasingly important regional center for the entire wax-cloth trade in West Africa.

The centrality of Togolese women in the colonial cloth trade sheds new light on the operations of agency and power within empire. First, we see how important the colonies were for testing Dutch technology, and in turn how supposedly passive, colonized women actively embraced these technologies and shaped the global economy. Second, we are reminded of the fact that colonialism was “profoundly material and that colonized and imperial centers were linked by a traffic in objects that was sensorially configured” (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 3).

After independence in 1960, the cloth trade became increasingly entangled in nation building, whereby the women traders became an important economic and political force in postcolonial Togo. The post-colony continued to work as a commercial hub in the region, organized around a state that essentially replicated its colonial predecessor in modes of taxation while maintaining an orientation toward the exterior through the port and border trade. Meanwhile, the cloth traders regulated capital flows across multiple frontiers and fostered the mobility of goods and people into the Lomé trade hub, accumulating immense wealth for themselves in the process. The Lomé market became a vibrant economic center in the region. In this system of spectacular accumulation, the cloth traders themselves became a national brand. The Nana Benz (or Mama Benz, in anglophone parlance) became *lingua franca* throughout West Africa in reference to these women’s wealth, authority, and vehicular power. As a brand/image, the Nana Benz provided a felicitous modern façade to the dictatorship of Gnassingbé Eyadéma (1967–2005), which was highly ef-

fective in attracting international donor monies and foreign investments into a “stable” political and economic environment that contrasted with its Soviet-leaning neighbors (Piot 1999, 2010; Toulabor 1986). Togo soon became a strategic Cold War frontier in the region; it also acquired the label “West Africa’s Little Switzerland” for its vibrant market economy and international banking sector.

By the early 1980s, the wealth channeled into Togo through the cloth trade reached such importance that it practically matched the revenue generated by the national phosphate industry. But then the nation-state began to disintegrate. When several state-owned enterprises collapsed during the mid-1980s, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank ushered the Togolese government into structural adjustment programs and austerity measures aimed at the reorganization of the state by the market. As elsewhere on the continent, the privatization of the state and the liberalization and reformation of the public sector pushed governments into fiscal crisis. Long-standing structures of state employment were transformed, essentially leading to the dispossession of Togo’s middle class, which was pushed into alternative forms of employment to counteract salary shortages.

Much of the 1990s was characterized by crisis. This predicament was brought on by major political and economic shifts that occurred at the end of the Cold War, with serious consequences for the cloth trade. The dictator, Eyadéma, was now pressured to liberalize the political sphere by an international community that had long turned a blind eye to his strongman ways. Although Eyadéma remained in power through a mix of political violence, and what Charlie Piot describes as “cunning, ruthlessness election fraud” (2010, 3), the regime’s political authority weakened and became increasingly diffused. The political violence that marked the democracy movement of the early 1990s led to major strikes, the shutdown of the market, and the fleeing of thousands of Togolese to neighboring countries.

This volatility forever tainted Togo’s reputation as a stable country with a thriving economy. And just as the Lomé market opened up again, the regional economy was hit by a major shift: *la dévaluation*. In 1994 the regional currency, the CFA franc (Communauté Financière Africaine) lost half of its value.<sup>12</sup> This had major consequences for the cloth trade, because it essentially turned an everyday consumer good into a near luxury. Along with the neoliberalization of the economy, the Nana Benz’s trade was further derailed when the main distributor of wax cloth, Unilever’s United Africa Company, pulled out of the market and the Dutch manufacturer, Vlisco, took over its West African distribution points. Essentially, the Dutch company liberalized all the Dutch wax-print patterns that the

United Africa Company previously distributed via the Nana Benz, who held exclusive retail rights to the designs. The unraveling of these long-standing trading and pattern rights broke the Nana Benz's hold on the economy.

Togo's commercial frontier was again redefined. The Lomé free port has become a major economic frontier for Chinese wax-cloth knock-offs whose unfettered circulation has thrown the West African textile economy into disarray. At the same time, the resurgence of Togo as an economic frontier for Chinese counterfeits has benefited the Togolese government, led by Eyadéma's son, Faure Gnassingbé, since the dictator's death in 2005. Indeed, Togo's economic despair made it especially amenable to and reliant on Chinese investments, including loans and development aid. Over the past fifteen years, relations between China and Africa have attracted growing attention. China's new Africa policy and its growing economic penetration (and enclaving of select zones) on the continent is hotly debated in US policy circles and think tanks. Such debates tend to focus on the neocolonial nature of Chinese capital in minimally regulated zones in general and the potential threat that Chinese goods and labor constitute for African subjects. Long-term Chinese development aid—often referred to as development aid with no strings attached—is another concern (Bräutigam 2011). As Elisha Renne (2015, 60) writes, "Since the early 21st century, trade between China and Africa has expanded, with over \$US 84 billion worth of Chinese goods exported to Africa in 2013, compared with approximately \$US 4.5 billion in 2001. China is currently the leading exporter worldwide of manufactured textiles and clothing, which represents one of its major exports to Africa."

In media and policy briefings, China-Africa relations are frequently portrayed as the new axis of South-South exploitation. Yet such utopian and dystopian visions of Africa have long animated conversations about the continent and its "place-in-the world" (Ferguson 2006, 4). This history thus has consequences for how we understand normative narratives about emerging markets that presume unprecedented opening up of ports, opportunities, and repertoires of taste. That Togo has become an economic frontier for China-in-Africa despite its lack of natural resources (unlike other parts of the continent, which attract Chinese investment in mining and infrastructure) is also significant. It demonstrates just how vital cloth and fashion are to the penetration of neoliberal markets.

Notably, women still dominate Togo's powerhouse textile market. The Lomé Grand Marché draws traders from all over West Africa and beyond, and Togolese cloth traders have started to become global entrepreneurs. Women traders have a long history in the making and design of this special material object through feedback loops between the cloth's circuits of

production and consumption; they were important supporters of the national state, and now they are key agents in the new global China-in-Africa trade. In colonial times, in national times, and in the global era, women's agency in the marketplace has been at stake. By the same token, women's agency has been critical to national branding and identity in Togo.

## Dense Materiality

Wax cloth sits at many frontiers. It is at once a commodity, a "social skin" (Turner 1980), an archive, an image, a text, and a material object with distinct physical properties. As with photographic images, it is impossible to separate the material from the visual, the image from the object. The comparison between photography and cloth becomes possible when we heighten the image-object relationship, which implies that the image cannot be separated from its referent (Barthes 1981). In their work on the materiality of visual objects, Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (2004) argue that when we think of photographs as both images *and* physical objects, we understand not only their physicality, opacity, and tactility but the ways in which they are "enmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions" (1). The same is true for cloth. Indeed, when we apply the rich insights from theories of photography to wax cloth, we can make important observations about the sensuous materiality of pagne.

The rich literature on photography also has much to offer for thinking about cloth as an affectively charged material object in terms of surface, tactility, haptics, memory, and melancholy (Sontag 1977; Pinney 2003; Strassler 2010). Just like the surface of a photograph has its own agentive quality, whereby it can be more than a passive bearer of images, so does the surface of wax cloth. The experiential qualities of cloth, which are both visual and tactile, are not limited to sight and touch, for cloth is affectively charged. In her influential work on Melanesian systems of value, Nancy Munn (1986) offers the notion of the "qualisign of value" to think about the sensuous characteristics, or qualities, of objects (see Keane 2003). Thus, while we can see, feel, and wear cloth, it also has the power to evoke emotion and memory—those "corporeal apperceptions" that occur prior to "conscious cognition" (Newell n.d., 3–4; Massumi 2002). Recall, for example, the sensorial properties of the sparkling color and the crackle of the sunburst pattern. The visual force as well as the energetically charged and pulsating quality of the pattern make the cloth vibrant in such a way that it captivates the eye (processed as a dizzying cognition) and stimulates viewers' imaginations. Munn's qualisign

of value inspires a fuller apprehension of Togolese perceptions of wax-cloth authenticity and the materiality of copy. Also theorized as “qualia” in current efforts to conceptualize the language of qualities, this refers to the “experiences of sensuous qualities (such as colors, textures, sounds, and smells) and feelings (such as satiety, anxiety, proximity, and otherness)” (Chumley and Harkness 2013, 3). Qualia can thus offer important insights into the material density of surfaces and help shift the analysis of cloth beyond the classical anthropological approach to cloth as material culture (see Hansen 2004b; Küchler and Miller 2005).

When buying cloth in the market, consumers expect to find color combinations and patterns that have the potential to enchant, or even shock, the eye—a quality created by the unique manufacturing process. As I describe in chapter 1, in Togo women have specific ideas in mind when choosing cloth, including a sartorial vision of its (fully embodied) tailored look, and ideas about when and how to wear it as well as calculations about the kinds of emotive responses they wish to elicit from others during aesthetic events. This is no easy task. And it is an especially daunting one when considering the abundant choice of *pagne* materials available in the Lomé Grand Marché. There, *pagne* is hawked on the street, traded in humble market stalls, and sold in large shops filled with bolts of cloth that are stacked floor to ceiling, creating an impenetrable wall of color that only the expert consumer can navigate (see plate 3).

Cloth that is charged with the kind of (sensorial) ammunition required to elicit admiration from others does not lay lifeless in the market, as a Lomé fashionista who prides herself in being an expert shopper explained to me. “It looks at you,” she said, “*C’est tellement beau!* Its beauty is so great, you need to touch it. . . . It speaks to you, and it wants you to have it.” There is even a kind of magic to the way that the sensuous materiality captivates the viewer’s attention. More than mere surface aesthetics, or inert image, the cloth’s surface properties appeared to literally animate this woman. Seemingly saturated with human-like qualities, the cloth’s haptic force created both dazzle and a tactile sensation, and thus an effect that is at once cognitive and sensorial. The relationship between the woman and the cloth is depicted as reciprocal: “It speaks to you, and it wants you to have it,” and the woman clearly desires that cloth.

Thus, when *pagne* is animated with an active social life, it can be seen as an actant in the Latourian (1993; 2005) sense, because it chooses the consumer and plays an active role in shaping the social world. But it can also be considered a form of distributed agency (Gell 1988) that

humans infer onto objects since the design is intended to have these effects. As I explain in chapter 1, the human touch is necessary to tame the cloth. In the process of bringing cloth to three-dimensional life in embodied performance, the Lomé fashionista is both enchanted by and a powerful agent of the pattern's magic. Even so, while I view cloth as an assemblage, and in chapter 2 I illustrate how cloth comes into existence through assemblages of heterogeneous actors, here I want to suggest that cloth goes beyond that. It is an affectively charged material object that animates people and things while it also patterns urban, national, and economic spaces such as the street and the market.

The new turn to materialism and materiality has revived debates in anthropology about the socialness of objects. Extending "the social life of things" perspective, wherein objects acquire a social biography with multiple careers (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986), this literature offers new provocations for thinking about human and nonhuman agency.<sup>13</sup> In her work on "smart fabrics" in design and fashion, Susanne Küchler (2008, 2011) investigates the composition of synthetic fibers. Smart fabrics are firmly technological and futuristic. These new materials, she writes, "[do] not just represent who we are, but [are] capable of standing-in for us, substituting for some of our own capacities" (2011, 124). Smart fabrics thus move the realm of the aesthetic to the futuristic repurposing of pure functionality. They promise the "posthuman" and revolutionary.

Cloth can be both traditional and futuristic. In fact, cloth is currently and has always been a site of technological assemblage and futuristic experimentation, as shown in chapter 2. Wax prints are not smart fabrics per se. They are not specifically designed by a laboratory science that creates the kind of fibers Küchler describes as "capable of responding to light and heat" (2008, 105); nor do they participate in the same innovation and invention-driven "technological materiality," which Küchler (2008) ascribes to the smart materials of the new (or third) technological revolution. And yet the success that wax prints, a product of the Industrial Revolution, had on West African markets when it was first introduced had everything to do with a form of technological materiality that made wax prints "smart" in ways that other cotton materials traded in Africa were not. Wax prints were and are color-smart; they presented the rise of color science and organic chemistry in perfecting the dyes that were colorfast, made to withstand the heat and light of African sun, and always in culturally desirable patterns and shades.

In West Africa, cloth and clothing are assembled both visually and tactilely (see Picton 2008; Rovine 2008; Eicher and Ross 2010). The aesthetic,

material, and semiotic characteristics of cloth matter enormously to its successful circulation and embedding in local processes of consumption and social reproduction. Textiles can be social—even national—skins that bridge the frontier of body and society by connecting a person's most intimate sphere to the collective and the nation, as we see in chapter 3. As this book demonstrates, *pagne* itself is multidimensional, transhistorical, and animated through story and touch. Women educated me about the meanings of particular patterns as they opened their wardrobes and trunks to share the memories imprinted on their *pagnes*. These were special occasions of trust and pedagogy when *pagne* became story cloth.<sup>14</sup> Elder women, for example often narrated their personal *pagne* stories in relation to the story of the Togolese nation. A woman who came of age during the late 1950s, for example, told me about the eighty-odd cloth pieces meticulously stored in her closet. Each *pagne* recorded the specific event for which it was made. Her eyes gleamed nostalgically when she showcased “*Otopa*,” an iconic pattern that features a series of seemingly moving or dancing stars and shot through with crackle and a dense blue-red color sheen (see plate 7). The woman remembered how she had bought the pattern in the market during the early days of independence, shortly after she saw Togo's inaugural First Lady wear it. For this woman, the cloth worked as a memory object whose tactile materiality brought back the joy of celebrating the success and the confident, hopeful style of the new nation. The afterlives of garments tailored from wax cloth retain the vivacity of previously animated, sensuous experiences.

It is this rich material and semiotic quality of cloth—to bring joy, to create story, to generate desire, to have agency, to anchor sentiment and memory—that, when bundled together, makes *pagne* so special, and hence an object of ongoing fascination. Much of the new turn to the socialness of things ignores the aesthetic and semiotic dimensions of objects and paradoxically turns away from the object and its “latent possibilities” (Keane 2006, 201). Like images, material objects are flush with instabilities; their meanings are unstable, ambiguous, and ultimately difficult to control. In his work on the infrastructure of Nigerian pirate video production, Brian Larkin (2008) provides an important example of how the material infrastructure of images can be hacked into, reordered, and “distorted.” Similarly, this book shows how the materiality of wax cloth—its authenticity, its crackle, and its openness to copying—enables distortions and flexibilities that account for its ongoing circulation. Without fetishizing the object, *pagne*'s deep materiality enables us to consider what its material and visual properties mean in specific so-



cial and historical contexts and how they are experienced and steeped in gender, national politics, cross-cultural patterns of influence, and relations of both alliance and betrayal.

The centrality of wax cloth in women's socioeconomic lives and in anchoring national economies and identities compels us to not only take the nonhuman agency of cloth seriously (how cloth and people animate each other) but consider its relationship to science and modernity. Cloth has long been a site of entrepreneurial and scientific experimentation in industrial modernity. It is also central to the making and remaking of global capitalism and its new designs, from imperialist expansion and the economies of the slave trade (see Beckert 2014; Kriger 2006) to the new sites of technological reproduction in China. The true picture of wax cloth in West Africa appears when we pull these different threads together.

The closer we look at the patterns of the pagne, the more we see the old and new interacting: in this case, how technological innovation and experimentation on Chinese factory floors has transformed West African textile markets and thrown long-standing patterns of trade and consumption into disarray, as chapters 4 and 5 recount. Here, the old theme of empire and the trope of the colonies as a site of imperial experimentation emerge alongside the "African future." In both cases, though, as I show in this book, these innovations emerged in interactive, and deeply gendered, spaces of cross-positioning. This process of patterning weaves the mutual modeling, negotiation, composition, and coproduction of this thing: the cloth itself but also its sphere of trade and consumption. The Old English word *patron* describes this process very well in that it is about making and providing models; *patron* contains in its roots both the fabric itself and the people who form its social contexts. Furthermore, it is not surprising that China has entered African consumer markets through the existing economic niche of the cloth/body/fashion nexus, and specifically the wax-print market long dominated by European products. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, I want to suggest that the hard-to-copy material characteristics of wax cloth—namely, the crackle, a result of the dye bleeding through wax cracks, and colorfastness—have produced new patterns and models to make and remake not just material forms and agencies but also spaces, like the market and the nation, as well as public selves.

Through the concept of dense materiality, I refer to the cloth's qualities of layering and condensing time and space as well as its ability to evoke emotions, to speak for itself and for others. In this way, Dutch wax cloth and its copies of copies are culturally and economically entangled

with identity, nation-building, and power. In their dense materiality we can trace certain patterns of the mutual making of humans and nonhumans (in this case, cloth) and the discursive and material spaces they produce.

## Patterns of Appropriation

Wax cloth is shot through with technologies of mimesis at the level of production and consumption. The current concern with the Chinese impact on authentic African textiles is full of irony, considering that what produced “authenticity” in the first place was rooted in the very technology of reproduction. All cloth, as print, to some extent is copy. Wax cloth is no exception. The classic pattern 14/0663 is printed in hundreds of thousands of yards each year, through both authorized and unauthorized channels. In fact, 14/0663 survives through its technological reproduction and dissemination. And yet it defies the logic of seriality and replication in conventionally printed, mass-produced cloth. Recall the crackle, the distinctive and inimitable visual background effect, produced during the manufacturing process when dye leaks through the cracked wax resin. Each yard acquires a form of originality or authenticity (an “aura” as it were) that is enabled rather than diminished by the technical apparatus of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin [1936] 1969). Walter Benjamin’s concern with the loss of aura and authenticity during the age of mechanical reproduction provides a useful entry point for thinking about the seductive nature of technologically engineered images/copies and their effects upon people’s perception.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the story of 14/0663 not only troubles the very idea of loss of authenticity and aura through replication, but also reveals that “origin” is just as fabricated as the copy; hence, this book’s emphasis on circulation and life (of the idea, form, product) through reproduction and patterning.<sup>16</sup>

The pattern’s many points of assemblage, imitation, and reappropriation (copying technique and design) make it a hybrid par excellence and, hence, a true product of the multiple. This is not to say that consumers are not deeply invested in the idea of origin/ality in wax cloth, especially when it comes to performances of sartorial distinction, as I begin to describe in chapter 1. Similarly, producers of “originals” draw on mechanisms of use-value enclosure through security measures of authentication and regulation to police the boundaries between original and copy—and thus by extension, between “real” (Western) modernity and its various others (mimics, fakes, alternative modernities). Central to this discussion

is Sasha Newell's pioneering work on the postcolonial relationship between modernity and mimesis in Côte d'Ivoire and his provocation that the fake/counterfeit was central to the making of modernity. As I show in chapter 2, cloth was the quintessential product of modernity in instantiating factory work and technological progress in the imperial metropole—a process that was based on mechanical reproduction and copying and appropriating intellectual content originating elsewhere. Modernity's obsession with originality and uniqueness, or despair thereof (Schwartz 2013), emanates from a long-standing historical relationship between modernity and in/authenticity (Newell 2012).<sup>17</sup> The power of clothing and fashion to blur and break down social hierarchies enabled a person to hide her “real,” or inner, identity behind a social mask. While the notion (and fear) of surface imitation continues to inform much contemporary analysis of consumption and fashion, anthropology has questioned modernity's “depth ontology,” whereby a person's “true” self is somehow located deep beneath the surface (Miller 2005a, 3). Such a narrow focus with the insides and outsides of surfaces and the notion of social passing not only disparages fashion and dress as superficial but fails, as Newell writes, “to take account of other cultural possibilities for evaluation in the act of consumption” (2012, 20).

In West Africa, dress and fashion work as powerful forms of display and public life. As Karen Tranberg Hansen argues, “Clothes are not worn passively; they require peoples' active participation” (2013, 6). In Togo, people are expert dressers, viewers, and evaluators of other people's embodied and carefully staged dress performances. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, an ongoing economic crisis, people's investments in the dressed body and its public displays have become especially important, and the multifaceted surface of real and copied Dutch wax cloth plays a critical role. In Togo, consumers rank factory-printed cloth by quality and origin on a hierarchy of value and prestige, with Dutch wax at the top followed by Ivoirian, Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Chinese wax. Roller-printed “fancy” prints rank at the bottom of this hierarchy. To pull off a successful, inimitable look is a complex affair that involves choosing the right cloth as well as tailoring, accessorizing, and bringing its rich texture to life. While sartorial elitism is shaped through a relationship with real and exclusive fashion, it is also produced in tension with sartorial populism based on copies. Indeed, the magic of a real effect has its own value in allowing Togolese to be savvy consumers of real/fake goods.

But copies come in many forms. As with counterfeit money, copies produce new forms of value anxiety (see Truit 2013; Apter 1999). Appropriate appropriation in Togo is constantly being redefined. As agents in the

new global China-in-Africa trade, women traders collaborate with Chinese companies to produce better imitations of Dutch wax while mobilizing discourses about heritage and authenticity, as described in chapter 4. Meanwhile, producers of originals draw on mechanisms of value enclosure, or preventing other producers from accessing their value, through security measures of authentication and regulation to police the boundaries between original and copy. At the same time, consumers in Togo have become increasingly suspicious of brands and labels, so they rely on touch and smell to detect product authenticity, as chapter 5 explores. This book redirects the conversation about authenticity, copy, and culture by suggesting that the question of what is real is not really the one we should be asking. Rather, the material story I tell in this book shows that our categories of real/fake, authentic/copy, and legal/illegal are ultimately fraught and do not offer critical insights into the workings of capitalism and the world writ large. In fact, our theoretical and moral preoccupation with the fake as a category ends up generating more material processes of value enclosure through copyright and trademarked protections. The core moral and ideological fears about Chinese counterfeits in West African markets have to do with the appearance of new empires, the decline of the West, and the subsequent reconfiguration of North-South relationships.

Unfolding the layers of mimesis and copy in cloth's dense materiality reveals capitalism's complex patterns. These patterns shift from copying the colonies' cloth and technology to new global relations of power, and seem to transact over passive African consumers. But neither the product nor the consumers have ever been passive. The story I tell in this book illustrates how these relationships are patterned on coproduction—of producers and consumers, as well as humans and cloth. Whereas in the colonial past these exchanges and feedback loops were mediated at a distance, African agents are now coproducing cloth in China.

## Tracing the Patterns

I first came to this project through the archive that preserves 14/0663. Fascinated by the global story behind this cloth, I turned to the sample books in the Vlisco archive to unravel the tangled threads that wove the story of Dutch wax in West Africa. As I worked materially with these objects in the archive, studying and touching the cloth samples to capture their narratives, each time I began making progress in linking narrative fragments to specific locations and technological processes, the object disappeared. I kept losing sight of the patterns that make up this

uniquely hybrid object because I was focusing only on its physicality. As Adorno wrote, the thing recedes before our gaze ([1966] 2007); we can only experience its human distortions. I encountered a similar sense of elusiveness, of cloth receding before my gaze, when I came to do my fieldwork in the Lomé market. My research in the Netherlands indicated that Lomé was the major center for cloth distribution in West Africa; it was the place of cloth. Yet when I arrived in Lomé, as the preface recounts, the cloth traders told me that the market was no longer there. It was apparently dead and had shifted to Cotonou (Benin), 150 kilometers east of Lomé. This despite the large bales of cloth I saw women carrying on their heads across the market and against the backdrop of a seemingly vibrant landscape of patterned fabric stacked in innumerable bolts across the street and floor to ceiling in market shops.

It was the contradictory scene at the supposedly dead market that made me want to understand how the wax-print market works today and what is brought to bear on this peculiar object, now endlessly copied and mass produced in China. How could I view cloth as both a concrete object to track, fold, and touch and a theoretical position from which to think about the ontology of markets, value, subjectivity, and consumption? And how would I ethnographically scale this multisited project while trying capture and represent its complex temporal scales?

Methodologically, I began thinking through scale by turning to various commodity studies, pioneered by Sidney Mintz's (1985) study of sugar as the vehicle for showing how seemingly remote places have been historically linked by the movements of capital, labor, and commodities.<sup>18</sup> In the Africanist context, Karen Tranberg Hansen's study on secondhand clothing and globalization in Zambia (2000) and Brenda Chalfin's work on shea butter in Ghana (2004) further developed the Mintzian political economy tradition by tracing circuits of commodity exchange and relations of power along chains of production, distribution, and consumption. Taking a commodity-chain and "the social life of things" approach to show how local histories and transnational contexts feed into one another, Hansen's work looks closely at both the economic dimensions of secondhand clothing and the cultural economies of clothing consumption. Although I found this approach methodologically useful for capturing the different dimensions and circuits within which my object was located, wax cloth—and the complex work cloth's dense materiality performs in patterning nation, taste, agency, and subjectivity—strikes me as a unique case.

Cloth is an especially powerful site of making because it works on and through the body, facing both inward in its capacity for individual

self-fashioning and outward as a signifier of individual or collective identity. Wax cloth makes livelihoods, social status, global trade, and the Togolese nation. Classic patterns such as 14/0663, for example, simultaneously make a visual impact and define the nation. While a pattern is something we can see replicated in an image, it is also a physical thing used to make, copy, and recompose other things, including markets. Thinking through the recent and historical politics of circulation of this curious object, wax cloth, demonstrates the significance of localized evaluations and the larger patterns of global power and capital circulation in which they are embedded.

This book examines wax cloth as a material thing interwoven with a history of circulating ideas and ways people deploy, manipulate, claim, and endow an object with matter. Rather than simply following an object like coffee or cotton from its site of production to the final consumer, I resist the urge to treat cloth as a simple commodity that begins with production as the site of making and ends with consumption, where the product is tamed or vanquished. Wax cloth is not mute, flat, or stable. It constantly moves. But its intrinsic mobility is not restricted to its global circulation across borders and time. We encounter cloth's mobility and flexibility in tailor shops where the material is cut and assembled into garments, when exhibited on dressed bodies strolling the streets of urban West Africa, or when it is being remade in factories in China. Who gets to control it, who gets to profit from it, and whose tastes are advertised tell us very different stories about global flows and capitalism against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial history and politico-economic transformations. This story complicates and decenters the dominant history of an imperial/global North ruling over a peripheral/passive South and weaves African agency into the patterns of global capitalism.

The story of wax cloth, its circulation, and its dense materiality narrates a process of ongoing formation. To pattern is to form, imprint, and compose; it is a process of constant crisscrossing, of squaring influences, and of mutual negotiation that facilitates different forms of human and object agency and subjectivity. I take up the patterning of the subject in the book's first chapter, "Fashioning the Body," which establishes how women and cloth mutually empower each other in performative acts of public self-making. This chapter charts women's ongoing investments in *pagne* in relation to the role of cloth as an active agent in the production, expression, communication, and evaluation of a woman's social skin. Togolese women play seriously when it comes to creating and presenting themselves in public, and they rely on the material efficacy of cloth to enchant and speak, as well as on their own ability to animate it through particular techniques

of the body. As women locate and visually mark their presence in public spaces, they dress with an agency and style that emanate from the combined action of the body and the cloth. Focusing on the interaction between bodies, cloth, and self-styling in the presentation of women's individualized fashion, the chapter explores how cloth and fashion work as a prime arena for women to claim a place in public life. This contemporary phenomenon, and the importance of cloth's materiality in the making of Togolese self and society, has deep roots that can be read in the archive of cloth that women wear on their bodies today.

Chapter 2, "Archival Prints," steps back in time to establish the historical development of the wax-print aesthetic. Wax cloth came into being as a product of imperial and technological experimentation in which the wax-print aesthetic was meticulously sampled and patterned on various handmade textile designs. Linking the complex historical, material, and mimetic creation of the cloth to the rise of new technologies of mass production and the making of colonial markets, I highlight how West African aesthetics and the difficult-to-discern notion of taste shaped, inflected, and in fact patterned the production of the unique cross-cultural wax-print aesthetic. My reading of cloth-as-archive highlights the overlapping histories of circulation that bolster the cloth while it decenters the dominant narrative. It tracks the negotiated presence of different external influences across time and space to dispel simplistic claims about the origin, originality, and authenticity of African wax prints. This chapter thus provides a historical foundation for understanding the wax-cloth commodity as the result of a material process of aesthetic and commercial negotiation that patterns not just the making of this object but its sphere of trade and consumption.

Moving away from the early history and circulation of the cloth on the West African coast, chapter 3 turns to its trade in Togo. "Branding Cloth, Branding Nation" narrates the entangled making of cloth, women, and nation. It establishes how the Nana Benz built the Lomé market into a monumental site of economic power and national prestige through their fabric labor. The chapter describes how the Nana Benz became one of the most potent economic and political forces in postcolonial Togo, shaping the West African wax-cloth trade until political crisis derailed their hold on the economy. Detailing this system of cloth distribution and pattern rights, I show how individual women determined the production and circulation of exclusive patterns through their charismatic trading prowess. Togo's Nana Benz tapped into the fabric's malleability to name and brand wax prints as profitable property, attaching both aesthetic and national meaning to the iconic cloth. These women's work with cloth is not

peripheral; instead it constitutes the formation of the postcolonial nation and the commercial, consumerist, and aesthetic spaces engendered. Indeed, they were so successful that the state sought to appropriate the women's branding power (and powerful forms of display) to legitimate their political platforms and to assert the nation as an embodied public sphere.

Although this worked for a time, once the postcolonial system and national marketplace faced the realities of devaluation and structural adjustment, relationships between traders, the state, and the market had to be recalibrated and patterns of exchange and circulation remade. Chapter 4, "Flexible Patterns," narrates the demise of the Nana Benz in favor of more nimble women cloth traders (Nanettes) who use their aesthetic and material knowledge of cloth to copy less expensive wax prints in China. This chapter tells the story of this transformation, which itself relied on the cloth's dense materiality and flexibility. It details the unmaking of the Nana Benz's old system of cloth distribution and pattern rights against the backdrop of shifts in global production and the unraveling of the postcolonial nation while chronicling the making of the Nanettes and their entrepreneurial flexibilities as they, in turn, remake cloth in China.

In neoliberal Togo, the increased circulation of a bewildering variety of upstart brands, knockoffs, counterfeits, and copies precipitated not only the global recalibration of registers of value but the local reappraisal of existing methods of evaluating the authenticity of cloth. Chapter 5, "Dangerous Copies," examines the consequences of these national and global recalibrations on established patterns of consumption. The chapter discusses how people's mechanisms of cloth evaluation and understandings of authenticity clash with the logic of a moral regime of value instantiated by the Vlisco company, which, assailed by copies, claims legal and technical rights to Dutch wax. But as this book argues, patterning is in fact imprinting, it is composition, and it is the mutual negotiation or coproduction not just of cloth but of commerce, consumption, and value by a range of actors, including the cloth itself. Ultimately, this process does not change with the introduction of intellectual property rights or new registers of value.

If this book began with a story about the metaphorical, seemingly invisible "death" of the market, it ends with its literal and spectacular collapse. The conclusion, "Assigamé Burning," recounts the 2013 burning of the Lomé market and the subsequent explosion of rumors and accusations around this tragic event. The disappearance of the market institution—that national monument that the Nana Benz had made



through their fabric labor—signaled a shift in the dominant economic regime that had governed the Togolese nation for decades. Dispossessed of their power and stock-in-trade, the women engaged in public protest, working the power of cloth to claim their place in the market and civic life. The burning of the market appeared to mark the end of the woman-cloth matrix in Togo and the old economic paradigm of the nation they had built. Yet their ongoing street demonstrations show that they have not entirely receded from public view. Today, the future of the market and women's continued role in it remain open questions.