

# The development process and production system of "*Pagne*" dress in West Africa : A case study in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso

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Place of fieldwork: Burkina Faso

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- Research background

The influence of western culture is prevalent in almost every aspect in Africa. Dress is not an exception. Western clothes have become popular, having driven out many ethnic styles of dress in Africa. However, in West Africa, women wear a unique dress made with colorful printed cloths called *pagne* decorated with vivid and bold patterns. The *pagne* was first produced as an imitation of Java batik cloth in Holland and soon after brought to the Gold Coast in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of its rather short history, the *pagne* has prevailed and become popular among women in West Africa. Women wear tailored dresses made with *pagne*, which are composed of a blouse, skirt and head tie, as well as a loincloth.

- Research purpose and aim

The purpose of this study is to understand the reasons why this unique *pagne* dress has become so popular in West Africa. I have conducted a field study in Bobo-Dioulasso, the second largest city in Burkina Faso, in order to present a case of the development of *pagne* dress in inland West Africa. I interviewed scholars and dressmakers along with conducting a bibliographical study. In this field study, I have tried to make clear, firstly, the impact of Islamization, Christianization and colonization on styles of dress in Bobo-Dioulasso, and secondly, the system in which the unique *pagne* dresses are made.

Concerning to the second point, I have conducted a participatory study in some tailor's offices in order to observe the practice of dressmaking, the apprenticeship system, the way of negotiating with clients, clients' behavior when choosing models, etc.

- Results and achievements of fieldwork

I carried out interviews with 15 dressmakers aged between the years of their 60s and 90s for the purpose of making clear the history of dress making in Bobo-Dioulasso. It became clear that training in sewing skills that is done at primary school and by catholic missionaries in the case of girls did not have such an influential impact on the development of dressmaking. Instead the many dressmakers stated that they had learnt their skills from their master dressmakers in the city 1940s-60s and that there were many Senegalese tailors in Bobo-Dioulasso who had a great influence on dress and dressmaking.

This could suggest that the colonial system of the former French territory in West Africa, which accelerated the movement of people within the territory, served for the diffusion of dressmaking skills.

- Implications and impacts on future research

In my field study, I could not shed light on the system of skill transfer in the cradle era of dress making in Bobo-Dioulasso preceding the 1940s. This should be made clear by questing previous studies regarding the history of dressmaking in West Africa.

1) A Senegalese tailor and his family in Bobo-Dioulasso. Many of the interviewees stated that Senegalese tailors who settled in Bobo-Dioulasso had brought with them advanced dressmaking skills during the colonial period.



2) Women dancing at a wedding ceremony. They dressed in matching *pagne* in the same style.

