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The Trans-Atlantic Dialogue of Kente Gentlemen

Cultural Impact and Value Creation in Global African Diaspora Fashion

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

African American Studies

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Professor Alden Young, Chair

Kente Gentlemen is one of several influential contemporary African fashion brands contributing to the expanding landscape of global Black Diaspora fashion. Founded by Aristide Loua in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (2017), the brand's contributions demonstrate a distinctive creative statement in fashion while also advancing new concepts of African image and its future economic growth. Deep examination of both the brand and its creative director support methods for determining long-term value and unique cultural contributions of emerging Black designers across the globe in relation to the broader fashion industry and supporting trade networks. This thesis explores the style aesthetic and cultural impact

of *Kente Gentlemen* and utilizes several methodological frameworks of Black scholars, including Carol Tulloch's style-fashion-dress narrative of the Black diaspora (Tulloch, 2016). Further analysis aims to incorporate the life journey and design practices of the Loua, who plays a significant role in expanding the style range of African fashion across the continent and in the broader global fashion industry.

The clothing itself plays one part. Music, history, entertainment and popular culture intertwine to inform the way people of the African diaspora can come to know and style themselves to assert a particular brand of agency. Through the exploration of the designer's vision, inspiration and styling, this paper surveys untold social histories inspired by *Kente Gentlemen's* collections, namely the Fall/Winter 2022-23 Collection entitled *The Birth of Cool*. By examining these unique contributions to global fashion, the inherent and long-term value of the brand is illuminated, supporting the cause for further development of economic and organizational infrastructure necessary for the continued success for global fashion brands like *Kente Gentlemen* to thrive for generations to come.

The thesis of Gina D. Lewis is approved.

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Introduction

“An **innovative** generation of African fashion designers is currently **redefining** ‘African’ fashion. Its members are in the process of breaking up the still prevailing hegemony of the Western ‘fashion system’ and establishing new design hubs throughout Africa. The **dynamic** engagement of protagonists in various areas of creative production and the rapid dissemination and communication made possible by social media are generating new design practices, identities and visual codes, which in turn are creating and transmitting a **new image** of Africa. What is **emerging** is an Africa that resides beyond the conventional view (so persistently produced in the Western imagination in particular) of a needy and crises-ridden continent. An Africa that shows Africans determining their own political, economic, and social living conditions – in **defiance** of all (neo) colonial interventions and incursions – by combining traditional and **global** knowledge. And since the African **diaspora**, which is in constant **dialogue** with the continent, also participates in this process in essential ways, Africa’s creative scenes encompass a wider cultural space that **welcomes** diverse identities.”

Banz, Lund and Oola (5)

Connecting Afro Futures

Fashion X Hair X Design

The above statement frames an observation of the curators of the 2019 museum exhibition “Connecting Afro Futures: Fashion X Hair X Design” held at the Kunstgewerbemuseum – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in Germany. Taken from the exhibition’s catalogue¹ of the same title, these curators sought to examine the relationships of image, craftsmanship and agency taking place throughout the continent of Africa, evaluating the politics of fashion’s landscape and where Africa as a continental entity along with its diaspora enters and emerges onto the scene. *Connecting Afro Futures* is apropos as a title, as Afrofuturism² conceptually embodies a future in which global Blackness is no longer in survival mode, but has infinitely survived its past, moving in its own complexities as fully human beyond circumstantial impacts of colonialism, displacement, and anti-Blackness. Creators and design

¹ The exhibition catalogue is titled *Connecting Afro Futures. Fashion X Hair X Design*. It is also edited by the curators of the exhibition, Banz, Lund, and Oola.

² “Afrofuturism expresses notions of Black identity, agency and freedom through art, creative works and activism that envision liberated futures for Black life.” – Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

leaders serve a core role in engineering this future, stewarding their vision in a material sense, constructing meaning and impact through identity, community and economy. Fashion becomes vital part of the architecture of new global sensibility and understanding of Blackness; through collective and individual style and self-representation. This signals a fresh evolution that differs from what is often imagined by a western world, reminding the global fashion economy of the power Africa and its diaspora hold to change the industry's future trajectory – or to build one completely anew.

Dress history and textile creation is an age-old component of global cultures, determining societal status and marking origins of creativity in weaving techniques, tailoring, and styling. Based on availability of raw materials and trade networks, regionality emerged in diverse forms of fabric and styling. Over many centuries, the influence of cloth and its purposed use in communities and economic trade framed memorable imagery associated with historical visuals of Africa's past. The peak of Trans-Saharan trade between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries enabled new materials to reach expanded markets and artisans, propelling the development indigenous textile industries through newly traded raw materials. This evolving textile trade continued into the eighteenth century, stretching into geographic regions that included present-day Nigeria, Ghana and Mali. (Nimo, 2022: 16). Early concepts of fashion and trends emerged as embellished garments and societal symbols, converging at the intersection of economic systems that promote the manufacturing, trade, and valuation of creating fashion products within the system. Textile goods and embellished accessories held multiple forms of value, as commodities of exchange or gifts. (Nimo, 2022: 16). Across the continent of Africa, this holds significance across regions, tribes and communities, its uniqueness and bold adaptation traversing its own story through history and time. Ceremonial and religious

adornment is a substantial aspect of many African cultures, well documented over time as a significant cultural symbol.

In the twenty-first century, present day commercialization and globalization of fashion trade harness the world's largest consumer markets. At the same time, Africa and its diaspora are disproportionately represented as a fraction relative to its global population and cultural impact on fashion business and consumption. This inequality refers to the defined global networks, industry structure and financial ecosystems that enable European fashion counterparts to maintain economic dominance in the global industry. A great desire is held for Africa and its diaspora to take its own reigns and expound upon its textile and adornment heritage into the global fashion sphere beyond the Eurocentric lens of “tribal” or “ethnic” often represented in Western fashion media. With the proliferation of the Internet, global connection of social media and digital commerce, and relationships to new markets all over the world, unveiling designers amongst a competitive landscape of wealthy fashion infrastructure reveals new challenges, pulling back the curtain on a drastically imbalanced financial ecosystem. For Africa to be helmed a long-standing creative hub, it is also mind-bending to still be considered emerging.

Within this global relationship of consumer markets and creative designers, there lies the connection of those that seek an African diasporic link to the clothes they wear, the brands and designers they support, the places in which they originate, and the processes to steward the creation of these garments. This research analyzes the relationships that create such meaning and connections through fashion identity and theory, motivations in self-styling and purchasing, and the power of the African diaspora in both identity and creation as it relates to consumer behavior and its associated value.

Concepts of value are explored relevant to the necessary economic development across Africa, explaining the work that pushes the boundaries of what it means to create within a fraught fashion ecosystem. This case study examines the work of designers who, like many emerging in Africa's contemporary fashion scene, seek to generate sustainable economic value systems which embody a belief system that counters traditional nodes of thinking regarding commercial trade.

Through several scholastic lenses, it will consider a point of view for the following:

- 1) One's connection to Blackness through dress (Scholar Carol Tulloch);
- 2) Ideas about clothing as objects and relationship to value (Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai);
- 3) Communication properties of dress and how they bridge diasporic differences through points of connection as a means of "Transatlantic Dialogue" (Scholar J.L. Matory)

The case study will evaluate the power and creativity of designer Aristide Loua, Founder and Creative Director of Ivoirian brand Kente Gentlemen, whose storied and global journey exemplifies the uniqueness and intentionality to use fashion design and business as a global vehicle for a shift in identity politics about Africa and beyond. With bold determination, Loua exemplifies this "creative production" "by combining traditional and global knowledge." (Banz, Lund and Oola, 2019: 5) Through his story, this research lays a rich rubric for the forward motion of this evolving concept of "Africa Fashion", its contemporary meaning, and how we can consider measuring its impact, progress, opportunities, and challenges ahead.

This thesis tells Loua's storied journey as a designer from Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire through the intersections of his biographical journey, his design perspective through the fashion brand he founded,

Kente Gentlemen, and the interconnectedness of the objects, visuals and inspirations that reflect his innermost thoughts, practices, creativity, and vision for his personal philosophy. While his dynamic story is continuously unfolding, his life and brand are best woven using the methodology of Carol Tulloch, British-Jamaican scholar on Black dress methodology, through the term she calls “Style-Dress-Narratives of the African Diaspora” (Tulloch, 2016: 5). Her defined method of “myriad routes and connections” proves to be one of the most effective way to carve out the depth in what could be easily construed as an ordinary fashion brand or an ordinary jacket to the untrained eye. Loua’s story is global and layered, one of deep value and transformation for himself, his culture and identity, the brand he created, and the broader African fashion landscape.

The format of this case study aims to model a “Style Narrative of the African Diaspora” as demonstrated by Tulloch in her scholarly work. This aims to connect specific details and nuances together, from the fabrics to the seams, in thorough and unconventional ways to understand the layered meaning and select visuals in Loua’s sartorial point of view. The paramount alignment is found in Loua and Tulloch’s shared inspirational tie – Black American jazz musician and legend Miles Davis, and his pivotal album “The Birth of Cool³”. In this case, “The Birth of Cool” represents worldwide influence that bends creative genres and produces emotional experiences, in a futuristic and effortless form of genius in which all three “artists” – Davis, Tulloch and Loua all share as their own individual vanguards. This exemplary thread connects and exposes the roots of their authentic creativity, which not only deepens the work and influence of these individuals, but amplifies connectedness to the broader African diaspora, which in turn creates deeper value for people across the world who find truth and comfort in these “myriad routes and connections.” (Tulloch, 2016: 5)

³ *The Birth of Cool* is an influential American Jazz album by trumpeter Miles Davis, released in 1957

The aim of exposing fashion brands with commercial viability that are also inherently African, though subjective, are linked to the ways in which one can claim to African Fashion. This essay furthers this exploration through one designer's point of view. Through the lens of Tulloch's methodology, we can broadly define how these brands uniquely create an exclusive value proposition in the global fashion industry. Through this value proposition, a well-documented approach to define and quantify its value which cannot easily be absorbed into Eurocentric fashion monstrosities can serve to advance Africa's growing industry. European strategic economic and market-share advantage stems from the multitude of ways that wealth has been extracted from Black people all over the world and the generational impact of unequal economic gain. As a by-product of colonization and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the remnants of underdeveloped industry in Africa relative to its global competitors leaves a long journey ahead to meet the expectations of future global markets.

To bring style narrative in alignment with value definitions, this research references the frameworks of Indian-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai to support basic ideas of value creation in objects through the human experience. Value is an inherent proposition in modern fashion retail and commerce, and a useful tool to begin to deepen the anchors that support the shift in global fashion towards Africa and her diaspora. Thus, defining diaspora and the dialogue between all of her audiences will become the final factor in connecting style narratives to value. I utilize notable scholarship of several in the field of African American studies, namely George Shepperson and his works on Diaspora, and J.L. Matory and his works on Transatlantic Dialogue to underscore the frequency in which Black style moves across the world.



Fig. 0.1 Kente Gentlemen at The Impact Shop, Amsterdam (left)

Spring Summer 2020 - An ode to life, and poetry

Photography by Reece T. Williams Art Direction and Styling: Aristide Loua

Models: Mouhamed Ndiaye

More life. More poetry Campaign for Kente Gentlemen

This collection of images ignites stylistic charm that evoke joy for anyone desiring visuals of Black male freedom outside of any gaze but their own self-actualization. A relaxed cool and confidence pour out of this sunny afternoon for men in sky blue and golden yellow; a colorful agency demonstrated through well-articulated ensembles. The whimsical idea of black men in their creative pursuits enjoying a café afternoon in refined stripes, sandals and berets evokes a sense of freedom most are not accustomed to seeing. Seeing black men in yellow suits or yellow berets is not a daily occurrence, yet the gracefulness of their style permits us to imagine this as a beautiful day in the neighborhood. It's the garments and their stylized choices that make us say yes, we want to go to that place, there is well-dressed freedom there. As we stare at the image a bit longer, wondering where this freedom might exist, one might suggest it's of the future, by which these images give way to the vision of realized Afrofuturism. These are Kente Gentlemen, and they have arrived.



Fig. 0.2 Sartorial Poetry

“How do you feel wearing pieces that have been handmade with elegant gestures and movements, from start to finish? A timeless tradition, bailing from the 17th century, which lives with us till today. That too is the poetry we wish to convey.”

Baba - Green (Suit Jacket) SS 21 + Kuti - Red (Pair of Pants). AW20.

Photo Credit: Centre X Where, Art Direction and Styling: Aristide Loua

Amidst natural elements of bamboo, stone, foliage and florals, bold and saturated color in dense textile garments paired with a white leather slide that appears to be a Babouche⁴ slipper. At the crown, Loua wears fellow Ivoirian creative and designer Lafalaise Dion in a signature cowrie shell hat. These elements combine in a colorful yet regal way, with an authoritative voice and perspective on African creativity – a positionality that asserts point of origin, bold adornment, and color as its signature statements. The photograph asserts the tone ‘This is my Africa, and we are not all the same’ - a peacock sentiment asserted in a calming confidence – the true essence of dandyism. His look is intended to stand out and provoke questions with answers full and fruitful of intention and meaning

⁴ Babouche slipper is a traditional Moroccan slipper handcrafted from natural materials

behind each adorned element of his ensemble. There is a gentle provocativeness about his sartorial flair that calls to address him correctly; his posture is not unintentional. Seemingly natural, both the organics of the background and the clothing in the foreground support the comfort Loua takes in his pose, asserting the true essence of the *Kente Gentlemen* aesthetic: of nature, and of confidence. His dressing is ultimate power positioning that grants the agency to be comfortable in one's own being, inviting in the depth of brightness and the power of cool. Whatever traditions previously defined African cool for men receive an upgrade, providing a new avenue for expression through the lens of this brand.

Loua's self-proclaimed poetry is indeed in the garment itself, calling to attention the elegance in which it is imagined and constructed. The final product and all of its processes are the words of each poetic stanza, creating structured lines both in the literal and physical sense. The physical embodiment of the garments is to take on a transfer of energy, from its historical interpretation and honoring of past tradition, to its way of being that is bestowed upon the wearer.

Kente Gentlemen is a captivating and artisanal Ivorian clothing brand that emerged globally by way of digital distribution. Founded by Aristide Loua in 2017, the brand has leveraged its visual storytelling skills to claim its ethos dubbed "Sartorial Poetry". With a signature jacket that is instantly recognizable by those "in the know" of contemporary African diaspora fashion of the twenty-first century, *Kente Gentlemen* by name, product and image peaks a distinct inquiry into the how and why of the product itself, while creating an aura of colorful beauty set apart from any comparable brand. In a lane of its own, *Kente Gentlemen* first expanded onto the digital fashion landscape through a series of photo stories of its inaugural collection entitled "More Life, More Poetry." Textured colorful stripes emerge in

photography across different geographical posts, from the shores of west Africa to cafes across Europe.

To deeply interrogate the many facets of *Kente Gentlemen* the brand, a framework of definitions support the point of view used to compose a value proposition that encompasses Pan-African ideology and Afro-futuristic ideal. The components of the brand include the meaning and authority of the brand name itself, *Kente Gentlemen*; the founder, creative director and lead designer, Aristide Loua; the physical garments designed, manufactured and created under the label; the iconography of the brand images produced, the physical spaces the brand and its operations occupy – from points of sourcing and manufacturing, to runway shows; and the community it has built – both in the physical and digital realms. These components combined assert a value proposition that assumes a position in a standard fashion system, which is predominantly established in Eurocentric frameworks. Yet through a Pan-African lens that can account for the connectedness, authenticity and diasporic rootedness, one can argue even greater value through deeper meaning and groundbreaking execution on multiple levels. A vertically integrated artisanal designer brand and system of producing clothing that impact community, tell true stories and paint clear pictures of African life and imagination on a global spectrum hold an artistic quality that calls for deeper value than the market's determination for the garment itself. A *Kente Gentlemen* jacket – in whatever facet - is not simply a jacket, but a collectible, a piece of history, a connection, a community, a statement. Its brand trajectory shouldn't be forced into a broken system that doesn't hold the appropriate determination of value, rather it leans into a spectrum of its own making, alongside the many other cultural creators of fashion who take a similar route. *Kente Gentlemen* is one of many African brands developing in this eye-catching and intentional

way. This notion challenges traditional fashion systems to expand for their qualitative contributions, rather than erode them to fit an already overcrowded sea of overproduction and luxurious waste.

Understanding African diaspora and defining its spectrum is critical to support this new wave of expansion. The notion of African diaspora stretches beyond a single national population and bends racial understanding, identity, and boundaries. It connects Africa to its people stretched across the world, positioning them in communication with each other. It is through this lens that creates a differentiated perspective that is channeled into the fashion creativity we aim to understand and interpret now.

African Diaspora

Expressed in the writing of George Shepperson⁵, African diaspora is approached in the following method: “the establishment and investigation of the areas to which the dispersed went and in which their descendants are living; the study of the interaction between these centers and their peripheries, at all possible levels; and the unceasing attempt to integrate these studies into the overall history of humanity.” (Shepperson, 47). In this broadened sense, the aim of African diaspora projects centers the humanity of Africanness on par with the rest of the world. In a narrowed sense, as sought here with fashion, it explores the connected nature across the bounds of African journeys through the ways and modes of dress, communication, creativity, identity, and survival. The term itself, African diaspora, as identified by Shepperson began to be “used increasingly by writers and thinkers who were concerned with the status and prospects of persons of African descent around the world and at home” around the mid 1950s through the mid 1960s (Shepperson, 1993: 41).

⁵ George Shepperson, The African Diaspora Chapter 2 “African Diaspora: Concept and Context”

“Diaspora is simultaneously a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings, of networks of affiliation. It is a mode of naming, remembering, living and feeling group identity moulded out of experiences, positionings, struggles, and imaginings of the past and the present, and at times the unfolding, unpredictable future, which are shared or seen to be shared across the boundaries of time and space that frame ‘indigenous’ identities in the contested and constructed locations of ‘there’ and ‘here’ and the passages and points in between.” (Zeleza, 2008: 4) This statement by diaspora scholar Paul Zeleza describes the language that codes dress culture across the African diaspora. African fashion holds rich storytelling, visual elements, textures, history, identity and persona; understanding its language, definitions and methodologies that shape and contextualize its story can be postured for more than just cultural consumption, but as research tools and vehicles for economic prosperity and ownership.

In understanding the meaning of African diaspora, Carol Tulloch’s concept of style-fashion-dress as a system of “myriad routes and connections, flows and tensions that originate from the analytical framework of Africa and its diaspora” shape an original story and name this notion of Black people and their “construction of self, and/or the use of garments and accessories in that process” (Tulloch, 2016: 5). In Tulloch’s alignment with Shepperson’s definition and meaning of African diaspora, as “Africa and the groups that formed outside Africa following the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and imperialism” there is a foundation to comprehend the intersections in which these connections occur. Without acknowledgment of the vast and global movements of Black people over time, there is no way to articulate the specific nodes which are then attributed into processes of persona and creativity, places where dress and embodiment occur in a material sense. If these concepts can be used to convey

“forms of self-presentation across the African diaspora”, then there is an avenue to explore the point of view of creators of fashion across the African diaspora as well. (Tulloch, 2016: 5)

Derived from Tulloch’s model on “Dress and the African Diaspora”, “historical truths, difference, entangled experiences, entangled identities, networks, narratives, cross-cultural connections, social, cultural and political issues” are challenged by the notion of self-concept and self-design through the art and composition of dressing. Through the lens of Diasporic fashion designers, it is possible to see a more expansive commentary of this system of elements that intertwine concepts of identity and design. To be considered a “Diasporic” designer may not require one to self-identify as Black or African, but that their art and creation through fashion – its construction, material usage, styling, imagery and manufacturing and storytelling – offer a set of choices that both articulate within the system of Tulloch’s methodology, while also offering a vehicle to connect with one’s identity in a meaningful and valuable way. A differentiated way of dress that aligns within this method of style-dress-narratives of the African Diaspora now emerges in its own lane. This qualitative element understood through Tulloch’s matrix is one differentiated from mainstream, mass-market, luxury, second-hand or any other Eurocentric fashion offering. In Tulloch’s effort “to convey that objects-people-geographies-histories are intertwined, and often interdependent in the contributions that style-fashion-dress practices have made to the articulation of these diasporic relationships” (Tulloch, 2016: 7), this case study builds on this construct to better understand and properly value the contributions of African Diasporic designers, the brands they build and garments they create that aid in this articulation.

As Tulloch's method is applied to tell the story of *Kente Gentlemen* and its brand, garments, images, creator and community, the African diaspora "routes and connections" of Loua's work and contributions become a clear and bold style narrative for the designer's "process of self-telling" as an artist and creative leader. It also articulates the way the garments themselves signal breakthrough agency and African diasporic connection for those seeking deeper meaning in their individual style practices.

The Black Dandyism Effect of Kente Gentlemen

The next articulation for *Kente Gentlemen's* framework is Black Dandyism, a concept well researched and explored by Monica Miller in her seminal book *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. While this research primarily relates this exploration of the Black Dandy to the Black American experience of slavery, or its "Atlantic diaspora" (Miller, 2009: 1), it's important to explore this concept in relation to the styling of *Kente Gentlemen* in terms of its connective tissue with global Black dandyism, and why the brand's aesthetic, garment construction, and styling speaks heavily to this throughline of style identity. "Blackness has been and continues to be stylized." (Miller, 2009: 5) Like Miller's analysis of "transhistorical and transatlantic moments in literary and visual culture in which black male subjects can be seen understanding, manipulating, and reimagining the construction of their images through the dandy's signature method: a pointed redeployment of clothing, gesture and wit," Loua's brand is a moment in style history worthy of exploration and understanding through this thoughtful lens. (Miller, 2009: 5) If the changing relation between the black dandy's body and the fine clothing displayed on it tells a much larger story about African diasporic identity and the representation of blackness across time and cultures (Miller, 2009: 5), then brands like Kente Gentlemen deepen this articulation.

To root its historical context, Miller references 1896 essay “Dandies and Dandies” by Max Beerbohm to define the “power of dandyism...in its status as a creative, self-defining art form that can have multiple social and political targets or themes.” (Miller, 2009: 7). Further elaborating, the dandy is defined as “one whose style is carefully considered and often, as a result, is more self-conscious and deliberate than that of a fop; this self-consciousness...mobilizes the figure’s currency.” (Miller, 2009: 8) This intentionality of purposeful dressing adds value for those who understand its purpose and meaning; our ability to articulate the added value is extremely important in brand building across global economic lines, yet has been hindered in articulation as to why African diasporic design in particular communicates this element. “Dandies must choose the vocation, must commit to a study of the fashions that define them and an examination of the trends around which they can continually redefine themselves.” (Miller, 2009: 8) Loua is the consummate dandy who occupies his post as creative director and central figure for his brand, and lives this definition in personal, creative and business practice. It is a rare articulation of traditional suiting where flair is added through fabrics, materials, pattern, and color choice. By choosing to create a gender-neutral brand and allowing stylistic gender norms to bend, Loua further demonstrates its unique alignment to dandyism as a concept.

What differs in Miller’s articulation of Black Dandyism is the fact that Loua resides on the continent of Africa, and thus his perception of lived Black experiences – if even identified as Black – may differ in the intended creation and voice of the brand, its poetry and its garments. To consider the end use of the garments in the broader African diaspora, a Black American perspective on the meaning and interpretation of the garments, brand and imagery reveal a connection linking to Black styling with flair, intention and cultural connection. Black Dandyism from different global points of view expand

Miller's notions of positionality, while finding common ground with lived Black experiences across the globe. They are parallel and connected by ways of image, culture and Blackness, forged in different ways but met with awe, understanding and shared identity. Global alignment with respect to Black creation grants expanded permissions of representation, creating diasporic dialogue through fashion objects.

Kente Gentlemen's Diasporic Conversation: Black Transatlantic Dialogue

Loua's creations contribute to the ongoing transatlantic dialogue between Africa and its diaspora; a live dialogue that has produced, if not always harmony, then a set of new, hybrid discourses of self-expression and identity (Matory, 1999: 94). The garments, images and films of *Kente Gentlemen* offer to the world a colorful and independent analysis of life and style from a global Black man. On the receiving end of that conversation, are those interested in immersing themselves in this imagery and inserting it into their own style narrative. In the global fashion conversation, the brand translates a fresh upgrade to unisex suiting with colorful stripes and dense woven fabric. But within the African diaspora conversation, it announces itself along the lines of Black dandyism, identity formation and pan-African pride, created from a brother who has known many places and creates from the place he calls home – Côte d'Ivoire; projecting his vision out to the world with African sartorial flair and a twist of French elegance.

Kente Gentlemen sits at the intersection of these components: African Diaspora, Black Dandyism, and Transatlantic Dialogue. These components assist in defining the "routes" of the brand's system of "style-fashion-dress". They define the expansive lanes that the brand carries beyond standard

fashion attributes and brand metrics. It supports the cultural value of the work, which is directly tied and amplifies the brand's worth and economic value, as well as the artistic contribution it makes on a fashion and craftsmanship spectrum. While fashion as art is highly contested, the qualitative components of *Kente Gentlemen* warrant artistic expression worthy of in-depth context and evaluation. The essay grants permission to establish new approaches and a fresh system to comprehend the complexity of this brand's creativity. (Tulloch, 2018)

Methods Summary

This paper exemplifies a method for approaching the multi-faceted elements of Africa's underrepresented fashion designers whose contributions to the global fashion landscape over-index in value creation through authenticity, global reach and connectedness via the African diaspora, and unique creativity that creates desire for fashion products not often found in the global marketplace. By utilizing the case study method inclusive of first-hand interview, visual analysis of both product, image and campaign materials, and cultural mapping through the Tulloch methodology of style-dress-narratives, we arrive at a pathway to understand the unique appeal for these brands and their products in an oversaturated global market. This analysis supports the argument that Africa stands to become a global force in the future of fashion and serves as evidence to support the investment in these networks who have long been neglected and under-resourced to match the competition on a global scale as it relates to competition on other continents.

In the examination Kente Gentlemen for this case study, the paper will first evaluate the properties of the brand name itself, tying the intentionality of the name to the origins of the cloth it seeks to honor. Kente cloth is one of the most globally recognizable textiles hailing from the continent of Africa, and this brand's interpretation of Kente, from namesake to manufacturing practice, contributes brand value that adds to its authenticity. Next, the paper will shift to the first-hand experience had while visiting the brand's founder, Aristide Loua in his home city of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, where I discuss his global origin story of living on three continents before the age of twenty, and how his global experience and family values shaped his intention with fashion. Lastly, the paper evaluates one of his recent collections, aptly titled "*The Birth of Cool*" which signals the designer's strength in cross-cultural connections that reach beyond the borders of the Ivory Coast and connect with a broader audience

in alignment with his vision to interpret art, music, poetry and his view on the world through well-tailored textiles. The collection just so happens to be named in reverence to Miles Davis' album, in the same inspirational capacity that scholar Carol Tulloch finds alignment with for her book on African diaspora style. Here we elaborate on the common threads that these creators find, and the ways in which this speaks to the value proposition needed to expand a long-lasting and barrier-breaking global fashion brand.

What's in the name *Kente Gentlemen*? Stories & Origins of Kente Cloth and the Baba Jacket

“For me, using the name Kente was more so to pay homage to such a cultural icon, you know? 'Cause obviously when people hear Kente, they think black Africa, within, you know, Africa. I think that was very important for me to have that, but also to signify that, we're not just gonna stick to Kente, but obviously like, it's a significance in the sense where we're gonna use all textiles that are made on the continent instead of the wax prints and contribute to the craftsmanship that's been happening since the 15th century... So for me it's like a homage to the cultural icon that is Kente for how you want to represent for the continent and people clearly understanding, okay, this must be, you know, from this continent. And, also the fact that yes, we're gonna specifically use and focus on handmade textiles.”

(Loua, 2022)

As African fashion continues to rise in claiming its own identity on the global stage, some designers of the continent take a more contemporary approach, while many others incorporate elements that tie directly back to heritage techniques and fabrications, in addition to rooting their purpose in their brand name or mission. *Kente Gentlemen* tackles the latter head-on, taking their design inspiration directly from the vantage point of Africa's fashion evolution over time, and defining it through the historic journey of the Kente cloth. Describing the technique of textile making a “timeless tradition”, the brand continues to honor the historic nature of the craft, as they “believe that the fabric should be celebrated and worn in [the] modern era.” (Loua, 2022)

Loua's poetic persona and desire for bold authenticity are reflected in every touchpoint of *Kente Gentlemen*; his stylistic manifesto written for the brand expressly states this as follows:

Among the myriad of wax print designs and fabrics, which have effectively been marketed and sold across the African continent for decades now, it's easy for anyone to get lost into what is perceived to be African fashion. There's surely a lot of misconceptions out there about what is meant by “African Fashion”. What even qualifies a style, a trend, a fashion, to legitimately be called African?

“African Fashion” is for all of us to discover; it is too expansive to narrowly be defined, and it does not need to be. In fact, fashion in Africa encompasses a multitude of traditions, cultures, textures, forms, techniques and philosophies, all primarily handwoven;

thus far removed from the confines of a single story. Its plurality, interwoven by a seamless mystery makes it all truly poetic, colorful, and enchanting.

That's my approach: to mold a sustainable balance of color, poetry, and culture; well before infusing that industry into each design. Hence, the African identity, which we proudly espouse, remains consistent in the continuing research, discovery, (re)design, and use of local textiles.

I for one fell in love with the ever so iconic Kente cloth. And I haven't looked back since.

Through this manifesto, Loua engages the idea of breaking typical notions of African fashion, cutting through the assumptions of the recognizable Dutch wax print as the quintessential marker of African style. The element of discovery in one's own environment allows for African style and stories to flourish in its own lane outside of established global fashion systems often connected to other countries and their economic interests outside of the continent. These global systems are often dominated by other factors beyond authenticity, creativity, balance and sustainability, and lack the desire to connect with heritage in the way that emerging brands seek to accomplish.

Kente Gentlemen undertakes this beyond a theoretical approach. In parallel to the origins of crafting Kente cloth with intentional meaning through its color choices and design, Loua also replicates this process by linking textiles and color choices to a deeper purpose. In the brand's 2020 Autumn/Winter collection entitled *Sodade*, the clothing reflected on the similarities between colors and emotions, a contemporary twist on design method with semblance to original Kente weavers from generations before. This exemplifies their version of what many fashion brands on the African continent seek to do: discover and define themselves, their culture, their identity and revere the talent and practices of their land to share and expand globally while building within their own communities. *Kente Gentlemen* states in its mission⁶:

⁶ Mission is referenced on the brand's website, kentegentlemen.com

*“... **Kente Gentlemen** is first and foremost a clothing brand, with each piece tailored in unique style and contemporary design. The first name in **Kente Gentlemen** praises the Kente cloth, a landmark textile and cultural icon of Africa, originating from the Ashanti Kingdom, land of our forefathers.*

Every finished, tailored piece is indeed fitted, cut, and sewn from fabrics made on the continent's soil; with high respects paid to the rich textile heritage and local craftsmanship spread well throughout its borders.

The quality of our tailoring and its social impact will forever be essential to us. As we remain committed in involving a community of hand-weavers, artists, tailors, and artisans; as to provide opportunities for the local economy and share the beauty of Africa to consumers around the world. The equation to which is quite simple: we create and sell a piece to you; our artisans get a cut; our tailors get a cut; all fair and square, and well above their usual pay rates.

*To us, **Kente Gentlemen** therefore becomes more than a clothing brand, especially in such an interconnected world. It is also a means for us, by us, to discover, value, celebrate, and narrate our diverse sociocultural heritage and identities through fashion, aesthetics, photography, and other visual arts. And it's only fair that we embrace and portray those rightful attributes to the global village we all belong to.”*

This intention breaks the boundary of nationalism, suggesting a representative tie to the contributions of Africa as a whole. While Loua was not born in Ghana, his reference to this connection proves the broader impact of African creativity and the importance of intentional lineage and recognition. Kente cloth itself has a multi-generational and transcontinental journey as an iconic fabric and textile vehicle for dress history. To understand the reverence within the *Kente Gentlemen* brand, a brief overview of Kente cloth history will underscore the origins of its visionary symbolism.

A Brief Overview of the Origins and Historic Social Life of Kente Cloth

Kente cloth derives from the Ashanti people of West Africa. This group was centered in modern day Ghana, originating in the Akan empire of Bonoman. (Thirumurugan, 2019: 307) The word “kente”

derives from the expression “keā Ente,” meaning “no matter how hard you try, it won’t tear.” (Mumford, 2020) Visually, it is recognizable by the characteristics of the woven strip cloth technique, known as the strip weave method. The strips tend to measure approximately four inches wide and six feet long, then pieced together to make a full cloth that measures about five to six feet wide. The weaving technique is inspired by how a spider spins its web. The story of the spider carries mythological elements in oral tradition as well within the history of this famed fabric. The complexity in the weaving is a central element to determining the different components of pattern and geometric shape; depending on the design it could take from one to four weeks, up to two to six months. Weaving is a highly skilled technique that is widely known in Ghana, and the Kente cloth is woven on a double heddle loom.

The Kente Cloth became one of the most notable of West African cloths for several reasons. The bustling textile industry of West Africa supported communities of artisans and weavers all over the coastline. In the Asante region specifically, the craft of weaving became very specified and the unique forming of the Kente came about using specific looms, skilled artisans and training of apprentices, and introduction of color through other plant-based dyes beyond indigo. The bright color and patterning made this cloth stand out in Bonwire, its origin community, located in present-day Central Ghana. As the cotton trade grew alongside the rise of international trade of cloth and other trade items, the importation of other fabrics outside of Africa allowed for new and more luxe fabrics to be introduced, such as silk. These imported fabrics were unravelled and rewoven into Kente to continue to add prestige and value to these cloths that were mainly supplied ceremoniously to the royal leaders of the Asante Kingdom. (Ross, 1998)

Worn by chiefs early on within the Asante Kingdom, the cloth became associated with royalty, while other simple woven fabrics aligned with domestic purposes. Other cloth types were more practical to

wear for common folk of the community in daily activities. Kente weaving was an intricate process woven on a vertical loom to produce a strip cloth and would take much longer to complete than other plain dye cotton fabrics woven on vertical looms in a much larger width. To achieve a larger Kente cloth, the strips would be sewn together to create a garment large enough to be worn and draped similar fashion to the styling of an ancient Roman toga. This styling was worn in the Asante kingdom, representing the social stature of the garment and its designation as a royal garment.

The cloth itself became recognizable as Asante Kente around 1817, and was expensive to make, given the introduction of imported cotton and silk from Europe and Asia that was separated and unraveled, and then uniquely woven into the fabric strips. Folkloric traditions were widely held in West Africa, which paved the way for associated meanings to also be assigned to cloths. Each message in the design spoke like a proverb and communicated one's place within a society in the early days of Kente cloth in West Africa. The fabrics themselves also carry distinct cultural and symbolic meaning, with over 300 unique designs that are appropriately named. Worn to cloak royalty, its early uses became a status symbol and was viewed as a lavish fabric woven for special occasions like weddings and funerals. The elements that form the cloth are taken from the intended wearer's gender, age, marital status and social status – a communication tool regarding one's identity within society. A specific cloth, Adweneasa, is the name of the cloth specifically used for kings. Other cloths were named by special personalities, religious and cultural beliefs and political ideologies. (Thirumurugan, 2019: 307) The most globally recognizable features of the cloth are the colors and geometric patterns that boldly mark the Kente for its uniqueness. The colors also convey meaning, and when woven together symbolize a message or proverb, adding a storytelling component to the fabric. It is a visual representation of Akan culture, and today represents a global symbol of pride to the motherland of Africa, associated with wealth and

celebration. This outward language of dress as status symbol is an early marker of this trend across global Black communities. (Ross, 1998)

An examination of precolonial West Africa shows that cotton was grown in the region and textiles were produced from the cotton crops. A skilled artisan vocation grew from the native population, and thus became one of many elements of culture and identity that generations sought to maintain and bring to the forefront as European influence, the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the colonization of Africa sought to change the landscape of African natives in damaging and complex ways.

Weavers were present in communities throughout Ghana, all contributing in some form to the strip weaving tradition. In northern Ghana, Daboya, Yendi, Bawku, Tamale and Navrongo were communities known to have a weaving presence. Daboya specifically in this region was recognized as main producers of smock weave. In the southeast region, Agotime-Kpetoe and Agbozume were communities that also produced strip woven cloths. Yet it is the middle belt region of Ghana that is the known as the distinct home for Kente cloth as it's known in its most famous and recognizable format. The Bonwire community is home to the origins of Kente weaving in its bright color format and pattern making. The colors evolved from creating dye from natural plants. Green, yellow and black were termed the "Asanteman colors", as they were associated with the earliest colors in use to create for royal chiefs. The neighboring community of Adonwomase, weavers adopted a black and white version of Kente that was unique to them. (Kriger, 2005)

Generations of weavers existed in these communities, creating a social life and system of its own. Many of them attached their identity of the community through its association with weaving. It is thought that early cotton cultivation in other parts of west Africa, and particularly to the north of the Asante region, gave way to the development of indigenous weavers and spinners due to its proximity

to the origin source material to make the yarns. Most indigenous uses were from hand spun yarns, a tedious task and slow process usually reserved for women. As the weaving industry evolved, imported yarns were eventually used, as well as the introduction of silks and other fine yarns not produced in West Africa that would give new allure and enhancement to the royal garments. In a weaving community, one could obtain the title of master weaver through apprenticeship at a young age. Ceremonies also took place that were central to the activities of weaving communities; for example, the offering of an animal sacrifice to commemorate a newly assembled loom. An extensive review of loom practice and its technical aspects are revealed in research from Alex Osei Afriyie, Charles Frimpong, Benjamin Kwablah Asinyo and Raphael Kanyire Seidu, *A Comparative Study on the Techniques, Tools and Materials for Indigenous Weaving in Ghana* (2021). Present day, weaving associations currently exist in the Bonwire community in Ghana where master weavers carry on the tradition of training apprentices and weaving according to market needs.

This practice of “both individual and communally based, profit-oriented entrepreneurial activities” stem from a long legacy of what scholar Juliet E. K. Walker labels “African Cooperative Work Ethic.” (Walker, 2009: 9) This concept sheds light on the economic motivations to not simply advance oneself, but to also be beholden to one’s kinship group and community. Established across a myriad of industries and practices in a precolonial Africa, societies maintained concern for the well-being and best interest of all of its members, suggesting cooperative enterprise as the means to execute this within communities. The textile industry was no different in pre-Colonial West Africa, with the Asante leading in commercial significance in manufacturing. This legacy serves as the anchor to which select modern day fashion entrepreneurs in West Africa look to advance their efforts to connect back to this rich heritage. (Walker, 2009: 12). Not only were they guided in craftsmanship, but also in business ethic and principles stemming from the customary format of folkloric proverb and tradition. Walker’s

research suggests the amplified attention to kinship and relationship in budding business practices, with the underlying principle of “group responsibility for the actions of individual members.” (Walker, 2009: 21). This traditional motive permeates the vision that Loua also holds for his desire to build a business that would propel more than just his own economic gains – a key tenant for remaining true to the legacy of Kente and indigenous cloth weaving in West Africa.

Value and the Social Life of Kente

“For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories.”

Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (1988)

An object’s power is beholden to societal elements that surround an object’s existence, introducing the idea of a “social life” for inanimate items. Kente exhibits a vibrant “social life” in line with Appadurai’s definitions of the term. The symbolic power of the Kente cloth lies in several factors: its ability to transcend time through generations; its storied artisan traditions through weaving communities; and its proximity and affiliation across royal families, which hold deep resonance with communities of the region, as well as the broader African diaspora. This origin story mirrors that of modern luxury manufacturing houses, and the foundations of many global brands to this day. Apart from its foundation, the symbolism of Kente cloth became amplified as global waves of African independence and Pan-African solidarity gave rise for the need for Black diasporans to create connection and positive symbolism. This rise of Afrocentricity helped to counter deeply rooted concepts of anti-Blackness amidst global movements against colonial powers and white supremacy taking place around the world.

The “social life” of Kente cloth exists in several realms: in the royal realm of the Asante Kingdom, in the artisan communities and master weaver subcultures, in the symbolism of Ghana’s independence from the British Empire, and a representation of African American and African diaspora solidarity with its connection to Ghana, and the continent of Africa at-large. The cloth embodies Ghana’s gift of craft and representation of the best of Africa, often symbolized as a transnational gift of international diplomacy, or a transatlantic “welcome home” to those who reach Ghana on their turf.

The cloth itself tells an economic story as well, as cloth held value for trade in currency in the early days of West African trade with Europeans. Upon Ghana’s independence from the British Empire in 1957, a wave of nationalist tourism prompted the promotion of Kente as a marketing tool for Afrocentric expression, while Black Americans took up opportunities to incorporate Kente into marketplaces in the U.S. The symbolism of wearing Kente in America communicated solidarity not just with Ghanaians, but with the Black diaspora as a whole.

Between Africa and the Americas, Kente also performs a transactional representation of diplomatic solidarity beyond solely Black diasporans. While former U.S. President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton visited Ghana in 1998, they attended a public rally wearing Kente Cloth, reiterating the cloth’s formality associated with royalty, or political leadership. At this time, Ghana was under the leadership of President Jerry Rawlings who often referenced the days of Ghana’s independence under its first president Kwame Nkrumah to reintroduce a narrative of national pride that would bolster economic development and tourism, further promoting relations between Ghana and the diaspora abroad. (Berzock, 2000)

Nkrumah was a leader for the people, deeply entrenched in the workings of the Pan African movement prior to returning to his birthplace of Ghana to ultimately lead the nation into independence in 1957.

Nkrumah attended at the 1945 Pan African Congress, where many leaders joined to discuss the affairs of African people everywhere in the world. This specific Congress in 1945 played a significant role in empowering Pan African leaders to lead Africa through the decolonization process. During the multiple gatherings of the Congresses spanning from 1900 to 1945, all male attendees were photographed wearing traditional business suits as a representation of professionalism and formality. In contrast, when Nkrumah leads Ghana to independence almost a decade later, he adopts Ghana's heritage fabric of Kente Cloth as his national dress, aligning with that of the great communal chiefs and royalty of the former kingdoms etched in Ghana's history. This ignited an enduring statement of legacy and culture, solidifying the independence era as one of African heritage and pride. (James, 1977)

The above examples showcase Kente cloth as a social textile with many meanings: as art, as craft, as a gift, and as a symbol of royalty, history, diplomacy, ancestry and connection. Rooted in the tradition of folklore, storytelling is a ritualist social component for the cloth, as it has been passed down that the weaving was inspired from the weaving of a web by a spider named Anansi. Diaspora relations and the reasons that support why African Americans so prominently adopted the fabric as an identity marker also serve as significant examples of the cloth as object in relationship to the enduring legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and a desired connection to Africa. Most frequent modern day uses include the Kente cloth strip worn as a stole to mark ancestry to the African continent, most frequently worn in the Americas by those identifying as Black American.

Considering this rich lineage of creation and the global recognition of this staple textile tradition helming from West Africa, it's understandable to anchor a global brand in connection with this rich

history. In just a few short years since launching the brand, Loua has made headway in circulating his own renditions of a notable fabrication in an iconic silhouette, rich with color, texture and meaning under the *Kente Gentlemen* brand label. Named the “Baba Jacket”, this signature item has been recreated and recolored throughout the seasonal collections of *Kente Gentlemen*.

With the stripe as its signature, and hundreds of pieces sold worldwide, this Baba jacket has become visually synonymous with the *Kente Gentlemen* label, beginning its own social life affiliated with contemporary and Afrofuturistic style, taste and sensibility. Woven by artisans in Côte d’Ivoire, the Baba jacket upholds the legacy of local manufacturing and indigenous fabrication and weaving techniques, offering a special garment that offers the magic of all the richness in a single garment. While first emerging in the digital landscape as early as 2017, a contributing factor to its excitement is the timeless quality, universal appeal, as well as a recognizable uniqueness in its offering – one has never seen anything quite like it. For this reason, this style seems to transcend the controversial trend cycle of fast fashion, while also engaging in maximalist style components: bold color, dense texture and dimensional stripes.

The Baba Jacket by Kente Gentlemen



Fig 1.1 (left) Saudade, A Visual Poem (Photography by Alexandre Tako; Art Direction by Aristide Loua; Models: Lafalaise Dion and Aristide Loua)

Fig. 1.2 (right): A Woman wearing a suit. - A photostory. Part I. Production: Kente Gentlemen L.L.C.

Mainstream global luxury and fashion marketing continues to appeal to the wallets of mass audiences based on trend newness, limited accessibility, and a desire to create a “need this now” appeal. Global brands have created lust worthy objects, attaching them to aspirational lifestyle aesthetics that often engage a specific cultural point of view. Yet, Black design across the world has been stratified along economic lines, creating bold limitation across this divide and restricting the full capability for expanded global Black cultural aesthetics to translate into their respective fashion brands similar to their Eurocentric counterparts in the global fashion industry. Because of this, exploring the value component that makes this element of creation, manufacturing and expansion more worthy than just looking at comparative product output. With limited resources, both creativity and solutions-based

sustainability efforts emerge at the forefront of their design practices, and more often than not tend to lean towards “slow fashion” movements and zero-waste business models. Additionally, the maker, their story, its origin can create elements of additive value to a brand; its distinct ethos and flavor standing out from Eurocentric fashion norms. The diasporic tie that connects Africa to a global network of invested interest means that this distinct but familiar ethos becomes a common language of excitement and further curiosity. Utilizing definitions of value set the framework to further understand what components constitute engagement across the African diaspora to enhance its dialogue.

“Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the *things* that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is *politics*, construed broadly. This argument... justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social lives.” (Appadurai, 1988: 3)

In this context, Appadurai defines commodities as “objects of economic value” (Appadurai, 1988: 3). Broken down in further context, Appadurai cites George Simmel in the 1907 publication *The Philosophy of Money* to underscore how we arrive at meanings, definitions and boundaries of value. According to Simmel, “value is never an inherent property of objects, but a judgement made about them by subjects.” (Appadurai, 1988: 3 [Simmel 1978:73]). For Black people throughout the African diaspora, value can be determined across a plethora of cultural context and connection, supporting the narrative of “buying Black” or intentionally supporting businesses owned by Black people as a political tool, cultural affirmation, or a means of establishing relationship across communities. This is an example of Appadurai’s political “link between exchange and value” and serves as a justification that “commodities, like persons, have social lives.” (Appadurai, 1988: 3) “What Simmel calls economic objects, in particular, exist in the space between pure desire and immediate enjoyment, with some distance between them and the person who desires them, which is a distance that can be overcome. This distance is overcome in and through economic exchange, in which the value of objects is

determined reciprocally.” (Appadurai, 1988: 3) The “distance” for the African Diaspora in Simmel’s context, is one that spread and removed a people from the continent to begin with, and the dialogue that calls us home shrinks that distance through objects in particular, creating aspects of value unique to this group.

Appadurai’s analysis in his essays extends the theory that can be applied to all of the social contexts that play a role in relationships across the Black diaspora, underscoring how moments in history and culture lead to establishing different “regimes of value” for relative objects.

“Exploring the conditions under which economic objects circulate in different *regimes of value* in space and time. Many of the essays in this volume examine specific things (or groups of things) as they circulate in specific cultural and historical milieus. What these essays permit is a series of glimpses of the ways in which desire and demand, reciprocal sacrifice and power interact to create economic value in specific social situations.” (Appadurai, 1988: 4)

Generally speaking, on desire and demand, most luxury constructs exist or were founded because of scarcity, or limited supply, and qualitatively better materials that drive increases for cost or production. Materials could constitute both the raw ingredients – literal fabrics – and also, the talent and location that produces the garment, meaning a contribution to a particular economic ecosystem or region, to a uniquely skilled population of artisans working to complete the item. As the image of Africa evolves through its own redefinitions and images and products, there creates an evolving relationship with value in the objects that it creates from this newness in image and connection across the African diaspora. There is inherent value in this collective exchange.

As African systems are being built to power this creativity forward, it is powering through systems of oppression and colonization that have had long lasting effects on political and economic frameworks that shape the lives of everyday people and their ability to contribute their creative and cultural output

in a meaningful way that maximizes its full potential. While this current and evolving renaissance across a multitude of industries and lanes of creativity, fashion will also take up space in this lane, its designers and practitioners leading the way for the visual storytelling of this time. The way of dress, both now and in the future, will be powered by those who are making the waves today, and the spectacle upon us will set style waves for generations to come.

Meeting the Maker: A Biographical Sketch of Founder and Creative director, Aristide Loua

I visited Loua in the summer of 2022 in the place he now calls home, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. I, a Black American woman, travelled to this place for the first time to work exclusively with Loua, who welcomed me to the city with an opportunity to conduct an interview, work side-by-side on photo shoots and work with the tailors in the Kente Gentlemen atelier built into his family home, just steps away from a beautiful lagoon on the water. Before arriving in Abidjan, I had spent a few weeks in Accra, Ghana, only my second time in the West African region (my first time in 2018 when visiting Freetown, Sierra Leone to conduct a similar but less formalized mission working with designer Mary Ann Kai Kai and her brand, Madam Wokie).

I found an artful and sensory experience in Abidjan, one that made perfect sense to cradle the amount of sartorial creativity that pours out of the city. Loua is one of several Ivoirian creatives making waves on a global scale in fashion. His contemporaries include Loza Maléombho, whose most recognizable brand detail includes meticulous metal work accented throughout her garments, and Lafalaise Dion, “Queen of Cowries” who creates magnificent and intricate works with cowrie shells while fiercely amplifying the importance of local creation. He knew them both well and set up introductions for me; a stark contrast to the lack of fluidity of connection that I experienced in neighboring city of Accra in Ghana.

In addition to Loua’s recommendations, I had asked other fashion creatives during my time in Accra about where to go Abidjan. One outstanding recommendation on how to have the perfect day in Abidjan stayed with me, which was to spend a day at the Ivorian Trade Center, alternating between

having a coffee at Africafe, and shopping in ABY Concept. Upon following this recommendation, I can say with confidence that this is a day well spent in Abidjan.

ABY Concept is a beautiful concept store in Abidjan that boasts the best in African luxury fashion in a contemporary curated fashion space that balances museum and art gallery aesthetics. Marquee installations are front and center upon entry with a continuous scroll of the words, “PEOPLE, PLANET, COLOR, CULTURE, SUSTAINABILITY, CRAFTSMANSHIP”.



Figure 2.1 (above) Photos of ABY Concept inside the Ivorian Trade Center; Photographed August, 2022 by Gina Lewis

Figure 2.2 (below) Photos of Kente Gentlemen's Aya Dress in ABY Concept, Photographed August, 2022 by Gina Lewis



Kente Gentlemen is on full display at ABY Concept. Pieces from his collection are available to purchase at this retail location alongside other regal and high-end African brands like Pepper Row (Nigeria) and Odio Mimonet (Nigeria). This retail setting creates the tone for the type of customer imagined for the use and wears of his brand: global, affluent, eccentric, maximalist.

Our interview took place on a Friday afternoon in late August. Recorded by local photographer Tora Traore of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, we sat outdoors at a restaurant called Kajazoma, a picturesque sanctuary of lush gardens, a flowing fountain and a well-decorated setting that befit the artistic mind of Aristide. We were well acquainted prior to this meeting through the digital devices of Zoom meetings, Instagram, e-mail, and What's App, but on this day, he would effortlessly open up to share his story to me, a graduate student and small business owner with no full sense of where or how far this project would end up. But with stylish grace, he took his time to share stories emerged in a sense of spiritual connection to art, heritage, and community. Perhaps driven by the desire to achieve similar aspirations in this lifetime, our missions met at an intersection, crossing over into each other's worlds for the necessary growth we both needed as Black creative citizens of the world.

Just one day before, Aristide had welcomed me into his family home in Abidjan where I met his mother and father, and two tailors that worked in the *Kente Gentlemen* atelier. The atelier has its own separate entrance so the artisans can come and go as they please. In the hour-long journey to reach his home from my hotel in downtown Abidjan, there is a sense of sheer amazement in the ways in which connection like this comes to fruition. From Los Angeles, California, USA to the end of a road near the lagoon in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, our paths of inquiry meet for storytelling, garment making, conducting business, image creation, brand building, and of course, some fun in between. It commences and comes to life for joint missions of expanding points of view on Black fashion, which also advanced our connectivity and purpose, making the time together some of the most productive five days I've ever spent.

‡

Aristide Loua was born in Gadouan, a small town in western Côte d'Ivoire, living in several cities before his family settled in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire's economic capital at the age of twelve. As one of eleven siblings (seven brothers and three sisters), his father worked as treasurer for the Ivorian government, taking on contract appointments that moved the family around through much of his childhood upbringing. In his teenage years, his father's next career appointment took the family to New Delhi, India, and while the family remained in India for a total of ten years, Aristide set his sights on attending college in the U.S. after completing high school in India. With an uncle and brother in the U.S. state of Utah, he came to America at the age of 19 and enrolled in community college, completing an associate's degree in mathematics with the hopes of enrolling in a 4 year program to then become an actuary and work on Wall Street. He continued his education at SUNY Albany in New York, completing a bachelor's degree in actuarial mathematics.

Growing up, Loua didn't think much of fashion beyond his love of star basketball athlete Allen Iverson and wearing his jersey. As a teen in India, Loua references the prevalence of sports outlets as the go to place to get clothing. Baggy jeans and the Ecko brand were staples, but other than that, personal style was an afterthought. The oversized look was mirrored from popular artists at the time, which influenced him as a teen through hip hop imagery. By the time he arrived in New York at age 19, the city felt somewhat familiar through pop culture and the movies.

Navigating education, tuition expenses, career options and where to live in America as a non-citizen ultimately ran into a challenging wall for Loua: after a short stint of working in South Carolina, Loua returned to Abidjan for the first time in over a decade in 2015. His family had returned to Abidjan from India just one year prior in 2014.

Returning to Abidjan with feelings of disappointment, Loua was faced with unexpected circumstances and navigated a challenging year of return.

“But it's only when I came back, but when I came back, it's in 2015, I was just, I lost just like, man, I have no job. I basically, I have no friends. Because remember I left the country when I was 16, so I didn't really have like, people that moved on with their lives. I mean, right. My friends, even though we were friends, but we only connected over a year. So not really like childhood friends, you know? 'Cause again, we travel, [my] family travel a lot. So coming back home, no social life, no job, no income. Coming back to your parents' house and, you know, you feel like a failure. You feel like, man, like, you know, something went wrong here.” (Loua, 2022)

It is from this sense of nearing defeat that his vision for a fashion company was able to blossom.

‡

“I know she has an eye for good detail and something that's beautiful.”

When Loua began to test out different potential styles for his emerging concept, his mother played a significant role in inspiring his taste level for fabric. Going about selecting fabrics and making the choices between great, good and just okay, shaped a critical eye for Loua, sharpening his decision-making skills as a designer.

“Growing up, she collects a lot of fabrics and especially wax fabrics. And she was like, oh, you know, I'm saving all this for your future wives, and things like that, <laughs> as a gift. And like, you know, that's pretty cool. So her buying the fabrics and me seeing the different colors, seeing the different patterns was really inspirational, inspiring, you know, just like the choice she was making. It was really, you know, you felt like she was spot [on]. I remember even like when I came back and wanted to, you know, work on test styles, right? She definitely was like, ‘Oh, this is a great fabric. Oh, this is good.’” (Loua, 2022)

‡

“He's one of those person, like, you know, you know, he definitely has his own specific style as well.”

Loua's father modeled professionalism through his dressing choices throughout his childhood upbringing, in which his son took note and referenced in his initial inspiration as well. Studying old photos and reflecting on childhood memories allowed his initial vision to take form.

“And obviously also my dad, obviously working for the government, [he'd] always have to like, dress professionally and this and that. So he built his own style. I remember seeing photos of him, old school, just like wearing, having a mustache and just like polo shirts and like, you know, chino pants, just like, you know, every time I go to work, just I had the whole suit, you know, looking nice and, you know, fitted and all that stuff.” (Loua, 2022)

Ultimately the brand reflected the familial memories of his mother and father, the delicate balance between superior taste in fabric and distinguished suiting style. This foundation shaped the initial birthing of *Kente Gentlemen's* mission and guided the creation process of the collections in present day. In 2013, while Loua was still in the U.S., he had received a shirt from his mother in a package – one that he still has to this day on the *Kente Gentlemen* clothing rack – which sparked the initial idea to start a fashion company, as Loua calls it his “inspiration ticket”. He would often send ideas to his mother, iterating different garments and ideas for building a brand. The plan from there was to save money and return back to Abidjan after about five years ready to start the business. That plan was derailed.

After overcoming a year of personal setback upon his return to Abidjan in 2015, Loua found his footing and regained his momentum to build the brand that first came to him in 2013. He was now in the country where he could begin building.

“...But now being back home and being able to meet with the tailors, find tailors, and also find artisans for the textiles and things like that. Discovering what is fashion in Africa, or, you know, how it can be exported... you know just like, you know, the diaspora, outside of Africa, but also, you know, anybody who into fashion style, really. And, yeah. And then, you know, we put everything together for, I put everything together for the first collection. And I was able to like, you know, eventually launch in April, 2017, and then we started growing.” (Loua, 2022)

When reflecting back, Loua noticed that in telling the story it sounded as though the vision came together with overnight success, but in stark actuality, was a slow process with minimal funding for a capital intensive project that would take a while to see financial gains in return.

“The process was very slow. Because obviously I didn't have the funds. Like, you know, I started, we started the business with just like, about 1500 dollars, really just like, literally nothing. Most of it was like coming from me and some, some, some, uh, some of my partners that we, two partners that, you know, I work with and basically burying nothing. So basically, obviously not having the capital up or capital, you just gotta like, make sure you put your money right places, right? So finding the tailors, I remember I did that with my mom, my mother. She is like, we started like, she was like, oh, let me take you,, I really want to start producing the first collection now. You know, let's look for tailors. So we started walking around and find, we found this one tailor, um, in the streets, and I need to travel to find more.”
(Loua, 2022)

Given Loua’s educational background in mathematics, it served as a key skill in the onset of building the business. Balancing the skill with his ability to take creative and gut risks allowed the brand to take flight.

“Cause obviously, you know, you have to do, the math has to be right, especially when you, you have little capital, right? To start with, you know? So, very, very conscious of that. But at same time, being open to, you know, take risk. 'Cause obviously at that point I had nothing to lose. I was just like, just like, jump on this project, or just like, I dunno, I dunno. You know? It was very defining for sure.” (Loua, 2022)

In the development process, Loua reflected on the process of thinking about what African fashion is beyond traditional wax prints, that have African affiliation, but not necessarily African roots. Creating within the local economy was critical for the foundation of Loua’s brand, and exploring the opportunities to create alongside them was paramount. In the process, Loua observed natural processes for fabric dyeing and weaving that would allow him the opportunity to design the fabrics for the garments, rather than source them from markets.

“And also we started like, okay, I need to travel in the country now to like, because the beginning of my conception fashion in Africa was like, okay, a lot of brands doing wax prints design in Africa. And eventually when I came back home, even the shirts that my mother gave me back in 2013 that inspired the whole journey was Waxman shirts. So my idea of fashion in Africa was like wax prints, wax prints. But when I came back and I saw these like, beautiful fabrics that, you know, people are able to do by end and contribute to the local economy, it was like, for me, it was just like, uh, easy choice, right? Uh, but I need to like, get in touch with those artists to explain my vision as well. So I remember my first time sitting down with them, you know, try for different, like taxi took a car and bush taxis, bikes and a motorbike until that we got to the village, to the source, right? Of the sauce <laugh> to the source of the sauce. And then, uh, yeah, I found out how the made, you know, the coloring and all that stuff. And it was just like, you know, from there I started designing my own fabrics and then, you know, implementing my own collection, you know, so yeah. <laugh>, it was a slow process, but it was really fun process!” (Loua, 2022)

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The following portion of this section continues with passages of our conversation during the interview, sectioned by theme and labeled “Lewis” (interviewer, Gina Lewis) and “Loua” (subject, Aristide Loua). They have been transcribed and edited for clarity.

On Influences

Lewis: *Specifically relating to fashion, were there any particular brands that influenced you as you were thinking about the making of Kente Gentlemen? Did you have alignment in fashion that was inspiring? It sounds like it was so organic.*

Loua: *No, because for me, when I received the shirt to my mother, I wanted to make, you know, I wanted to have those pieces, but I couldn't really find like a real market for it. Like, there was maybe because maybe I wasn't much aware of that fashion, especially like, you know, men's wear in the U.S. is also difficult to get, let alone African men's wear, you know, Afro-inspired menswear. So there wasn't, so I felt like, okay, there was a need there because obviously, you know, I'm sure people like me are looking also for us. Like that type of things. I'll say the only brand that caught my attention at that time back in 2014, -15 was Ikiré Jones. I don't know if you know. Jones. He's based in Philly, I think. And they do like a suits with work experience, I think most of the time. I think maybe they, they have evolved now, but yeah, it was one of the brands that I was just like, oh, okay. This is, this is cool.*

But obviously when I came back and understood like, you know, Africa or fashion in Africa, it's not just wax print. It's much more material to go in, to be inspired by and to actually what of what I actually absolutely love. It's creating the fabrics. I mean, all of this is just like something that I designed myself before we made it to like a final piece. And that was tremendous also in a sense where, you know, uh, the identity of a brand is also like, reflected through the, the fabric choices or the fabric design. So it's something that no other designer can have. Basically, if you design your own fabric, you are in control of everything. Supply chain, production like that. And also control of the final design, the final aesthetic. And wax prints or the other textiles is something that everybody can have access to. But when you design your own print, it's a whole, you know –

Lewis: *It's a whole different element.*

Loua: *Exactly. It's a whole different ball game.*

Lewis: *So let me get this straight. Imagined or envisioned actuary, mathematician. Becomes textile designer. Designed from color, stripe size, everything. So this element is self-taught?*

Loua: *Everything is self-taught. Everything is.*

Lewis: *Say it again one more time.*

Loua: *Everything is self taught <laughs>, but I definitely collaborate with the artisans in a sense where I'll tell them, okay, I want this, for example, I want this strap to do this color. And after this one, I want this strap to this other color. And basically, you know, having that opportunity to also like, learn the techniques and also like, see what they do. I can understand that, okay, maybe instead of doing this, why won't, why don't we do like this? Instead of why we don't, we use this color? And additionally, like, you know, so for example, for a collection, I will send them design of the prints that I made. Even, it's just like, even it's as far as me saying that, okay, you see this pattern, I want this like, to be a different color, to be a different shade, to be a different, length, and to be a different size. And then yeah, they, you know, they work on it, send the sample, and then rework, need to rework more. Validate.*

Lewis: *So it's a collaborative process?*

Loua: *Exactly, it's a collaborative process.*

Lewis: *It's a collaborative process. But for you, I think it's, I'm understanding that it's knowing the expertise of what they can do, to then infuse a direction?*

Loua: *Yeah, Absolutely. Right. Absolutely right. Yeah.*

On Inspiration

Loua: *...Eventually, back in 2000, before I moved to New York, 2011, I started listening to old school hip pop, especially song from, "I used to love Her" by Common. It was a big song of mine. And then I started discovering A Tribe Called Quest... so that love for Old school hip hop then eventually transition into like, okay, there's a sound behind that's like very, like, you know, that's very cool and very, you know, it's jazz, you know. So I started listening to jazz, you know, I had this like, heavy jazz period, you know, Coltrane, Davis, everything just started listening to them...*

And then eventually that's when I moved to New York. And then obviously New York are giving opportunity to just like, it's just like, I mean, going to museum. And then, you know, also Tumblr was very important as well. 'cause I, I was huge on Tumblr. I was like a lot, I could spend days on Tumblr, just, I listened to jazz and just like on Tumblr, just looking at inspirations, looking at, you know, that's what I discovered. Like, a great photographer, great American photographer. I forgot his name. And Basquiat as well. And I'm just like, yeah, this is, this is cool. This is cool.

And then there's this like, group, in Brooklyn, street etiquette that was huge on Tumblr world. That's who I discovered them, basically [like the] kids in Ghana. We're friends now as well. I just like, okay, this is like, you know, the way they dress, the way they like, you know, the approach of this, like, not worrying who you are, honestly. It was just fascinating. So that, that's what I felt like I kind of took inspirations.

So through those inspirations, just like whatever, modern or ancient or old history, I was able to pursue my own like, you know, appreciation for art, passion for music. And eventually, just molded me into, opening up myself more to the art world rather than the scientific map. Very like, you know, nerdy. I was very, I was a nerd, you know, I'm still a nerd, actually! I just love math! But I studied math all my life and eventually like moving into fashion. Yeah. Through those aspiration, through those, you know, travels was very important.

On Culture, Poetry and Color

Lewis: *Alright. So, you seem to have a gift for poetry. So I want you to kind of tell us - we talked about this yesterday, about culture, poetry, color. Did I say it right? Culture, poetry, color. I don't know if it's, is it in a certain order?*

Loua: *No, it doesn't have to be in a, in a specific order. But those three words are very, like, very important.*

That seems to be like the center. That's the DNA.

Lewis: *This seems to be like seamlessly woven, no pun intended. Seamlessly woven into the brand. That seems to be a unique, rather, it's its own art form for you; having this story and consciousness woven through the brand. How would you describe that skillset of yours? Do you see it as a skillset? Do you see it as a talent, or is it your way of being? How would you describe it?*

Loua: *That piece, I think I obviously having a sense of background, it's, it's, you know, but I also have a, uh, I, I like literature. I like writing more, like much less reading. But I like writing, you know, I like writing. I remember, uh, I'm working on a book, actually novel that I've been writing. It's a French, you know, uh, novel that I've been working for, like, the past couple of years. And like, it's a lot of pages and all that stuff. So like, you know, I love writing, especially poetry. Just like, you know, you pointing there from different situations, personal especially to express, mostly express or let go, or some feelings that I have or like, just like,*

put paper on paper, just like express or just like, you know, and with the brand, I think if anything, what the brand allowed me, I actually, I remember when I, you know, the brand is like a came out personal necessity, first of all.

*Just like, okay, I want, I have a different part. I want to get a clothing that's in line with my culture that's in line with who I'm, but also the brand gave me the opportunity to self-actualize a lot of things that I was just passionate about. For example, I like photography. I like, you know, music, you know, and I like writing as well. It's just like, okay, this is something I work in. You know, write a story, whether it's visual or written, the theme around the collection or, or write about different pieces and what, what it feels or what, what it means to me. Being able to have all these things together for one brand, I can just do, like, I can add direct, I can take photograph, or I can do a photograph, or I can do a film, or I can have music. I can, you know, I can write something. I can write a script. I can write, you know, a poem. I remember having this series, a poem called *A Woman Wearing a Suit*, you know, where we have a visual, and then there's looks about like, you know what, high mix with fierce and a woman's wearing the suit, you know?*

Lewis: *So how does it make you feel when you see a woman wearing a suit?*

Loua: *Oh, man, it's fantastic. It's just like, wow. It's beautiful for me. It's like a beautiful side. It's a beautiful side. So those elements are very important. You know, poetry and culture.*

Lewis: *So maybe a poetry book in the future, maybe?*

Loua: *Yeah. We'll see. Yeah, absolutely. You know, okay. <laughs>, we not, you know, we not, I'm not against, I'm open to anything at this point, you know, especially coming from wanting to be actuary to now being a designer is just like, yeah, I can become anything.*

Lewis: *You can become anything.*

Loua: *Yeah. Absolutely.*

On Future Aspirations and Inspiring Others

Lewis: *Who do you hope to inspire? Who do you think is most influenced by what you do today? ...And this project is seven years in the making, right? 2015 - So, seven years in the making. What do the next seven years entail? Yeah. If you think about the amount of time it took to get here.*

Loua: *Yeah, yeah, Absolutely. Effort and all that.*

Lewis: *From where you're at today, next seven years.*

Loua: *Yeah. I think, yeah, let's start with the last question. Obviously the whole history, seven years, which is like a lot of effort. I feel now we're at the point where we are, we at, you know, obviously Covid happened. That was a big blow to a lot of aspirations. But within seven years, hopefully we have our own store where the concept or where the vision, the story of the brand, the influences of the brand are well represented for photography, art sculptures, things of travel, you know? 'Cause I don't want to have a store where it's just like clothes, just even on the shelves. No, I just wanna have like a store where you enter, you can feel, you can sit down, just relax. You just have an experience...but be in that zone.*

I think, I think for us, it'd be very good to have a flagship store, a flagship boutique, within seven years. So we can invite people for coffee or you know, can drink, we can have sound playing, you know, different music of the world or, or the continent, and have well curated pieces and looks, throughout different corners of the place. I think that's the vision. If I were to say something like, and then in terms of, and also continue to grow in relationship with you and different buyers out there, continue to grow the brand organically. I mean, it was only last year that I presented my first collection in Italian Fashion Week. A couple of months it's gonna be Portugal and maybe someday in Italy, or Lagos Fashion Week, for example.

What I, that I wanted do as well, uh, in South Africa. So, we'll see. We'll see. Basically for me, it's all about taking one day things, one day at a time, you know, slowly progress, organically, go at the pace where it's just like, 'cause I'm, I'm slow. I'm into slow fashion too, you know, so I don't want to have, like, you know, right. I don't want to overwhelm myself too much, you know, it's all about soft life. It's just like, you know, having what you need and a little bit of more for your family or community, but it's enough, you know? So, so I would say that. In terms of a person I want inspire, who inspire, who will inspire me, yeah. My parents for sure. You know, especially my mother. She's hardworking, super, super hardworking, and she has loads of energy. You know, she's very, she's been very inspired. I mean, since the very beginning, I've done everything with her, just like from a taste, you know, through the fabric selection, a compliment of my full process. And, you know, discovering the tailors with us while, you know, going together in different markets.

Lewis: *And anyone you hope to inspire by what you're doing?*

Loua: *I think, I think my, my, I don't want to be too, how you call it and say, oh, I want to inspire my generation of the youth and all that stuff. But I think if it happens that it goes to God, I think that's a positive thing. If it can, I can have a positive impact with the youth here, you know? 'Cause I feel like a lot of, there's a lot of reason as to want to leave the country, I mean, I understand even people going through difficult times, just be able to live up crossing oceans and things like that. I had the fortunate moments in my life where I was able to travel and experience a bit and come back. But yeah, just that I would say inspire youth to just take hold of what we have here.*

Because when I came back, I didn't really have anything, even though the experiences that I had, you know, I didn't come over with anything. So, building from, literally from nothing. So just like, you know, just to say that we have the resources here available to

just like, everything out, nothing. And eventually, like, you know, as you push forward, be able to find yourself because, I think for me, there's nothing really out there that can really rival what we already have here. We have so much talent, so much potential, so much resources.

On Home

Lewis: *What do you want people to know about Abidjan? What do you want them to know about Côte D'Ivoire?*

Loua: *Yeah. Côte D'Ivoire is beautiful. I think it's a hidden gem, you know!*

Lewis: *Say it again!*

Loua: *Côte D'Ivoire is beautiful. I think it's a hidden gem. A lot of people do not know Côte D'Ivoire, which is fortunate and unfortunate at the same time. 'Cause if people know this place will be quiet, we wouldn't have the chance to just like, you know calm conversation. The secret spot with what running, it'll be very busy. But it's a large country if you like tropics. It feels like people who experience maybe Bali and love Bali. It feels that Bali but in Africa, you know? So if you like Bali style, even the food, you know. So I love, I love, I love my culture.*

I love people. I love our food. Abidjan is beautiful. It's surrounded by waters, by the lagoon. And then you have the sea, part ocean, beautiful beaches in Bassam.... There are places, even myself, haven't had the chance to visit San Pedro, beautiful city as well - that's like on the coast. And it's literally for even outgoings local, we haven't really had the opportunity to even see, you know, so it's still like a desert, desert, you know, space basically for most of the time. I'm grateful to just be back home, especially at this moment of time where Africa or Black Africa has become the dream now in terms of pop culture, in terms of culture, in terms of pop culture as well. In terms of music. In terms of fashion, is definitely like, you know, our Côte D'Ivoire is definitely like, you know, we're pushing, we're pushing the narrative as well.

On Wax Print Fabrics

Lewis: *You touched on this a little bit earlier, and I hear this through your exploration of wax prints. And when you talk about wax print and what that means, doesn't mean. So with that in mind, what do you perceive to be the biggest misconception about African fashion? Do you even like to generalize it as African fashion? Break that down.*

Loua: *Yeah. I think for me, I prefer calling it fashion in Africa. 'Cause African fashion, African obviously comes as an objective. It's like, okay, but it's so, uh, you cannot put fashion in Africa in one single story, right? Single artist. Because even here in Côte D'Ivoire, a country of 22 to 25 million people there about 60 different tribes, you know, six different ways of communicating, 60 different ways of appreciating fashion or just, you know, so within one country you have like different ways of expressing yourself, but let alone the continent of 50, 54, 55 countries, right? So I have a problem with that term, but also, before I came back in 2015, I was also victim of it, was ignorant about what is fashion in Africa.*

'Cause for me, fashion in Africa was like, oh, you use a wax print, you like, you know, if you are in Paris or you are in Tokyo or London and you see someone wearing white sweat shirt, or you see that's, oh, this guy's African, or it must be from like, somewhere, especially in West Africa or South Africa, or Congo, right? Or Central Africa. And it's that thing that got associated to us. But the whole thing about, you know, wax textile is something that's not made in our country or in our region. I mean, now they're trying to like, change the narrative around that to make it obviously, because they don't want to be seen. Like, they don't want to lose the, you know... so I remember when I came back, and and for me, it's also passion for [the] political, right?

In a sense where, who are you contributing? Who are you investing in? Are you investing in, you know, industry that outside of your country? Or are you investing in what's being made by your people for over, since the 15th century, right? And the math was just like simple for me. For example, if I were to make this jacket, right, before making this jacket, if I'd make the choice to use a wax print, I had to pay a fee to buy the tester for the wax print, industry tester, industry, mega pump mega rich companies. Or do I go to an artisan to make that fabric for me? And then it gets, its cut right from the final sale of piece, right? It gets, its cut, the tailor gets its cut and everybody's happy, right? It's either that or I just pay, you know, the fee to, to the giant, you know, corporation making my spring test out. And then nobody, you know, and then, you know, the artisans, you know, that are struggling even to compete in this market, in this fashion market, have less opportunity to make, to make a living at this point. So for me, ...it changed my conception of fashion in Africa, and then realized that, you know, everything is, all the resources [are] available, definitely.

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At the time of our interview, Loua was seven years into his journey with the Kente Gentlemen brand. Through the power and connectivity of social media, stylists and creatives have been able to connect with Loua, enabling opportunities for his recognizable suits to be sported across the world. The brand has gone on to show during Portugal Fashion Week and Lagos Fashion Week in Nigeria, while also participating in trade shows in France. In addition to ABY Concept as earlier mentioned, he has also been placed in high-end brick-and-mortar stores in Italy, Ghana (The Lotte Accra) and Nigeria (Alara Lagos), and in e-commerce boutiques based in Africa (Industrie Africa) and the United States (FRTWN), as well as printed in editorial publications including Vogue Runway and Elle Côte d'Ivoire. Of course, he remains a cultural fixture in Abidjan, where he showcases his collections across the city and intersects frequently with its arts and music scenes. Moonlighting as a DJ, his taste in clothing is only one area where his creative arts and personality shine – his clear connection to music is fluid in this secondary talent, bringing together community on the dance floor to global beats. Building fashion brands, collectives, companies and trade organizations are a multi-year, decades long journey. Loua's is a

promising enterprise with intentional commitment to growth and expansion for the representation of Africa on the global stage.

Cross-Cultural Connections of *The Birth of Cool*

“Yeah, I think Miles Davis, obviously [has] an album called The Birth Of Cool was an album that really like, inspired me, especially with the new collection, which also called The Birth of Cool and some pieces of it. I actually, I have Miles clothing named after Miles, the Miles II, jacket, for example. That look, you know, I feel like reflects his personality, which is colorful, but still elegant and, you know, well put together the lines, double breasted because we love those breasted jackets, like bright colors. And, so yeah, I think his personality was just amazing. And also listening to the, his, watching documentary that I seen, like him recently came out recently was just like, me, just like seeing everything that he was able to accomplish, not just musically, but also in the way he carried himself, you know, where he is like a twin without even trying, you know? So, yeah, Miles is major peoples”

(Loua, 2022)

My time spent with Loua in Côte d’Ivoire was shortly after his completion of Kente Gentlemen’s Autumn/Winter 2022-2023 Collection entitled The Birth of Cool. We began our talks of my visit in late spring of 2022, right after the first images of the collection began trickling into the digital fashion ethos in early March of 2022. Designed by Loua and created with fabrics woven in both Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire, a style story of color and flavor emerged in a refreshing way. Citing musical references of personal admiration, Loua called on jazz legend Miles Davis as the vessel to communicate the arch of this sartorial journey, from design, to film, to photography, to runway. Not only did the compellation include clothing, with pieces aptly named for its musical namesake, but also included a short film by the same name. A complete and holistic visual experience of the collection immersed viewers in a full sensory experience of what it means to dress in this brand and embody its qualitative stance on global African fashion. It is undoubtedly cool, an extension of Loua’s creative mind and

poetic demeanor. The Kente Gentlemen brand maximized the traditional fashion calendar by giving this collection an extended life through film, photography, storytelling and travelling runway shows. As a byproduct of maximized brand exposure through these vehicles, Loua's consciousness of made-to-order and custom fulfillment minimizes waste impact and overproduction of product – a fine balance of creating a profitable business while being mindful of the harms of garment overproduction.

Launching a collection is a deeply involved process, moving from creative to production to execution to launching. While an artful practice of intentionality and creation, a production element of making specific quantities to size and to order, while determining marketing activities fit to tell this story globally, digitally and in real life. Fabric selection is a key part of the process, as Loua aims to design the color patterns himself, commissioning the weaving of the fabric for the garments himself, rather than select the fabric as is from a marketplace or fabric vendors. For Loua, this keeps the brand on a fresh edge, bringing something completely new to his designs. While he frequently utilizes the talents of local fabric weavers, this collection incorporated fabrics from both Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. The sparkle lurex fabrics came from Ghana specifically, as this detail best channeled the sparkling edge of the Miles Davis era, the glimmer of lurex woven into dense, bold cotton in shades of pink, purple and black. Loua would travel to Ghana several times in the process of creating the collection to solidify the final textiles and negotiate pricing. No detail is left undetermined.

Loua announced his vision of the collection on the brand's website in celebratory fashion: *“This collection is a party! It's an ode to the cultural, musical achievements of Africans and the African Diaspora in the post-colonial era, from the 70's up to the 80's. The way our mothers, aunties, fathers, and uncles jazzed up, flared pants, glittery looks and daring fits, performing, and partying to the sound of artists and musicians of that era.”* You can

tell his amalgamation of these nostalgic touchpoints central to Black culture and eras of past Jazz life get a West African interpretation through the fabrication and tailoring details unique to this region. A central look for this collection is “The Miles Look” is “inspired by the legendary jazz musician and artist, Miles Davis.” Loua states that the “look takes on influences from Miles’ sartorial flair and genuinely cool approach to clothing”, suggesting that the execution of this is not simply cosplay to Davis’ legendary style moments, but rather an interpretation of his own ethos as a creative legend in his own regard.



Fig. 3.1 The Miles Look, Photographed by Marc Posso, Art Direction and Styling by Aristide Loua (pictured)

Loua’s design approach is not captured by mirroring looks of Davis into the collection, but rather the motion, aesthetic and intended ethos of purposeful dressing and styling in how that combination of efforts communicated a language that helped elevate his artistry and mystique. Calling on Miller’s explanations of dandyism in its connection to Miles Davis, the practice “in its most progressive and positive form, dandyism allows its practitioners to ‘perform’ or imaginatively access different identities, more avant-garde identities, more inclusive identities.” For Loua, this is a dream state

imagined to connect and evolve one's sense of self from Davis' confidence and cool, channeled into a collection of garments, and leaning on color, material, shape, fit and tailoring to tell the story. "A much more consequential game of 'dress-up,' dandyism makes it possible for people to expand the definition of what they are and who they can be."⁷ (Stradford, 2020: 62) In reflecting on Davis' infusion of metallic fabrics and the "sophisticated Sun-Ra vibe he had going on in the 1980s", Miller describes the evolution of Davis' image priorities as follows: "First he wanted to be cool and then maybe mysterious and then, perhaps, of the future." (Stradford, 2020: 62). Loua's collection parallels these image priorities with certainty, and is most indeed of the future, even though it calls on the past. Unsure of what era of the future this actually exists in, due to the bursts of color and freedom across a melanin spectrum, one can imagine an ageless Miles Davis somehow landing on this style spectrum, colliding with the moment of intended artistry and limitless cool.

As highlighted in the 2019 documentary of Miles Davis, aptly titled "The Birth of Cool", commentary is made on Davis' unique style, both in the music, and as his artform as a musician, inclusive of styling himself. Writer Farah Griffin elaborates on this in the documentary: "I want to feel the way Miles sounds." Miles Davis' exemplary career in the world of jazz music was not the only feat in his lifelong artistic pursuits. The style of Miles Davis was an evolution in its own regard, ever-changing over the years and unescapably cool. He had a love for clothing and was named the best dressed musician of all time by GQ Magazine in 2011. Radio personality and entertainment guru Michael Stradford recalls the style of Miles Davis through a collection of interviews in the book entitled *Miles Style: The Fashion of Miles Davis*.

⁷ Interview with Scholar Monica Miller for *Miles Style*

“In the forties, Miles Davis wore the baggy, oversized suits of the day until Dexter Gordon shamed him for dressing ‘country’. It would be a few years before he discovered his own personal style, peaking in the mid-fifties and through the early seventies, then flying off the rails during the last (visually assaultive) decade of his life. But he was never dull.” (Stradford, 2020: 7)

Weaving is a continuous process that extends beyond the clothes themselves, but almost of equal importance is the story that they are telling, and thus, how the story gets composed. Loua’s artistic composition as designer and creative director means an intentional connection to color, time and place – that is his material poetry. While product photography is design to capture the elements of the garments themselves, it is through his short film, aptly titled “The Birth of Cool” that tells us the lifestyle of these sartorial creations.



Fig 3.2 Kente Gentlemen still image from the short film, “The Birth of Cool”

Reflections on the Kente Gentlemen short film “The Birth of Cool”

There is a freedom here that blends gender, joy, expression and comfort. These glimmers of expression are a typical Friday night. A version of Afrofuturism we haven't quite experienced yet, or maybe we imagine. Our Black American gaze in connection with this seems familiar but lightyears away. We are connected but distant from this freedom. The dandy aesthetic, there are all shades of melanin, men are comfortably adorned, men are in sparkling pink, there are no visibly Euro-centric hairstyles. In this world, there are no hood politics or respectability politics to appeal to, rather a sense of well-dressed aesthetic, a desire to show up and show out. Are they wealthy? We don't know. Are they having a good time? Yes. Do they look damn good? Hell yes! Is there joy? Indubitably.

The short film, available for viewing on the Vimeo online platform, has a run time of only three minutes, but qualitatively holds the components equivalent to a global campaign. This extended music video is part visual short story and part fashion commercial, with clean editing, vivid coloring, and a musical nod to both Afrobeat and Jazz. Trumpets and piano are prominently displayed, and cowrie shells are adorned as complimentary accessories to Loua's vision on film. The garments themselves are colorful confetti of lurex, stripes and batik-dye, the colors exploded on camera like shards of rainbow reflection on disco balls. Deeply vibrant and explosive, maximalism is fun and expressed as cool. A fresh wave of expressing African joy and pride is displayed in the form of dance, style and community.

There is a conceptual definition for what Loua creates. He embodies the definition of “Cool” outlined by Robert Ferris Thompson in a framework that centers Africa, not just because Loua is from there,

but because he also embodies a connected vision to other parts of the African diaspora that further extend its reach, visibility and imagination, making conscious contributions to an aesthetic of Afro-futurism that is more attainable than it is magical or undefined. Thompson outlines this qualitative notion as “Control, stability, and composure under the African rubric of the cool seem to constitute elements of an all-embracing aesthetic attitude. Struck by the re-occurrence of this vital notion elsewhere in tropical Africa and the Black Americas, I have come to term the attitude “an aesthetic of the cool” in the sense of a deeply and complexly motivated, consciously artistic, interweaving of elements serious and pleasurable, of responsibility and of play.” (Thompson, 1973: 41)

Loua flirts with this definition in his own regard, cultivating his own act of seamless magic while navigating uneven business terrain. His steps are smooth and well executed, well-tailored along uncertain and fragmented journey of a fashion entrepreneur. His headwinds are properly suited, thus embodying this qualitative value defined by Thompson. “Manifest within this philosophy of the cool is the believe that the purer, the cooler a person becomes, the more ancestral he becomes. In other words, mastery of self enables a person to transcend time and elude preoccupation. He can concentrate or she can concentrate on truly important matters of social balance and aesthetic substance, creative matters full of motion and brilliance.” (Thompson, 1973: 41) This concept of cool in essence serves as a security blanket for Loua, protecting his creative assets and self-regard against the uncertain outcome of entrepreneurial ebbs and flows. Aristide himself has cultivated his community across the Abidjan artist’s landscape. Creatives gather at their local watering hole, in this case Le Pic Villas Hotel in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire. Loua is also a DJ and spins a set or two. The crowd includes the models, designers, DJs, and creatives that surround the execution of a wholistic vision of creative freedom.

With Aristide Loua holding titles of Executive Director, Art Director and Stylist; the film was directed by Will Niava and funded through the ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative⁸. The campaign premiered during Paris Fashion Week in 2022, and *The Birth of Cool* Collection went on to show on several global runways and fashion events. Its premiere showcase took place in Porto, Portugal at Portugal Fashion Week in Fall 2022. Not only are they making fashion, but also photography, a film, a movie, a campaign. You must tour it. Runway shows, production, logistics. The execution of this takes many, many forms. While the collection is inspired by Miles Davis' Birth of Cool, this short film suggests in contrast Loua's own definition of cool. His own birthing of cool is inspiring on its own. It bursts with color and joy. The contrast of cool blue and warm red undertones fuel warmth and light on screen.

The glimmer, freedom and suiting echoes dandyism in a new context. As Monica Miller states in *Slaves to Fashion*, her description of dandyism in the Harlem Renaissance is "A concentration on the dandy's cosmopolitanism establishes the black dandy as a figure both European and African and American origins, a figure who expresses with his performative body and dress the fact that modern identity, in both black and white, is necessarily syncretic, or mulatto, but in a liberating rather than constraining way." (Miller, 2009: 178) She describes this in reference to the work of Jessica Feldman, *Gender on the Divide: The Dandy in Modernist Literature*, "the dandy as a figure that reveals the cultural transition that modernism embodies; 'He is the figure who practices, and even impersonates, the fascinating acts of self-creation and presentation. He is the figure of paradox created by many

⁸ A programme of the International Trade Centre, joint agency of the United Nations and World Trade Organization, see <https://ethicalfashioninitiative.org/>

societies in order to express whatever it is that the culture feels it must, but cannot, synthesize.” (Miller, 2009: 179). In Loua’s short film, he is the central “figure of paradox” in a dazzling fashion, illuminated through lights, color and sound, a dense livelihood of well-dressed liberation. “Dandy style in the modernist period highlights the presence of a cultural condition in which the binaries that unnecessarily limit identity can be and are being challenged. Modernism is a state in which ‘a true change of style implies the ability of [the dandy’s] genius to see, and by seeing to create, however dimly and intuitively, at the farthest reaches of culture, and, blindly one startling step beyond.’” (Miller, 2009: 179) Loua’s expansive approach to design, fashion styling and creative directing amplify his ability to challenge fashion norms, as Miller explains. His creative work keeps him a step ahead, pushing new concepts that advance new imagination in the Afro-future.

Akin to describing the style musings of Miles Davis, one personal account – Gwen Terry, wife of jazz fellow legend Clark Terry, expressed Davis’ style with flamboyance with enough for everyone to go around, down to the socks. “Not only was he a sharp dresser, all the cats had custom shoes and beautiful socks, they had gorgeous accessories like jewelry and hats...It was more than the clothes they wore, it was a state of mind. Their valets had to be dressed up, the women they were with had to be dressed up too...He had all kinds of hats handkerchiefs, suits, custom-made everything! Looking good and smelling good was the status!” (Stradford, 2020: 25) This description parallels with the lifestyle brand Loua also cultivates through the brand’s imagery, and also visible in the short film.

While Miles Davis the artist, rather than the dresser, seems to impose his influence on Loua’s collection, it seems to be the amalgamation of classic cool and bold flair that arrive at tailored suits in

bold woven lurex. While Davis never arrived at this particular sartorial choice, perhaps a blend of his evolution might arrive at a piece like this, an accord of where his style began and where it ended.

Davis as an artistic subject “knew the value of mystique and branding long before it became popular. These photographs spotlight a beautiful, self-possessed, dark-skinned black man who was clearly American, but at the same time refused to be constricted by America’s limitations. These were timeless images of a solitary genius at the peak of his creative powers, always impeccably dressed and clearly didn’t give a damn about what you thought of him.” (Stradford, 2020: 49) The photographs in reference are from Davis’ Kind of Blue era, from which the studio album was released in 1959.

To figuratively assess Loua’s muse as a diasporic translator that connects us to the broader underlying style component draws us further into the collection. As described by Monica Miller in emphasizing the connection to Black dandyism in the interpretation of the jazz legend’s sartorial choices, “Miles Davis’ fashion choices were anything but capricious, as they were designed by him to be challenging of expectations. His music was meant to make you listen; his fashion was designed to make you look.” (Stradford, 2020: 61) Tulloch picks up on a similar thread, as she explains her book’s connection to *The Birth of Cool*. “The book, of course, is inspired by the Miles Davis Nonet jazz album *The Birth of Cool*, the genesis of which began in 1947 and has had continued worldwide influence across musical and art genres. Davis and his band explored complex emotions and experiences through improvisation, composition and the performance of ensemble jazz. A line of inquiry I also explore in *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*.” (Tulloch, 2016: 8). The emotional, or unspoken elements of Loua’s figurative work are translated along similar lines.

Tulloch's work paves the way for us to interpret the many intersections of culture, creativity and execution of a fashion brand like Kente Gentlemen. Using her methodology, we can come to know the brand, the visionary and the collections in a meaningful way that puts on a path to understand its every meaning, and most importantly, to give it value – translating monetarily when we measure it against what goes into today's consideration for modern luxury. Her book and methodology convey that “objects-people-geographies-histories are intertwined, and often interdependent in the contributions that style-fashion-dress practices have made to the articulation of these diasporic relationships and their place in dress studies.” (Tulloch, 2016: 7) In this case, we look at intersections of Ivorian fashion as it relates to the broader continent of Africa and its relationships to the diaspora, its connection to American Jazz great Miles Davis, and the use of materials and artisans that impact the communities and economies of both Ghana and Côte D Ivoire. A beautifully woven jacket serves as the objects, the designers, models, artisans and creatives are the people, the geography canvases the place of materials to the end location of where the jackets are eventually sold and worn, its history held in the influences, from Jazz music to Kente cloth. Kente Gentlemen represents the ideal subject to constitute the myriad of “routes and connections, flows and tensions that originate from the analytical frame of Africa and its diaspora.” (Tulloch, 2016: 5)

A luxurious definition of the journey of African fashion diasporic routes and the romantic language that intertwines music and fashion, sound and visual, culture and dress create a rich compilation of something far beyond the objects themselves. The irony of *The Birth of Cool* as both a subject of fashion collection, the title of the book central to African Diaspora dress, and Miles Davis'

quintessential jazz album are not coincidence. If Miles Davis “changed music five or six times”, then perhaps Aristide Loua can also do the same for fashion.



Fig 3.3 Album Cover, *The Birth of Cool* by Miles Davis, 1957.

Fig 3.4 Movie Poster, *Miles Davis: The Birth of Cool* documentary, 2019.

Fig 3.5 Book Cover, *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*, 2018

Carol Tulloch published *The Birth of Cool* in 2016, a year after *Miles Ahead*, the biopic film of Miles Davis, releases in the US. *The Birth of Cool* documentary debuts at Sundance in 2019. Kente Gentlemen releases his *The Birth of Cool* Collection in 2022.

Miles Ahead: Davis & Loua in Dialogue

“Yet, in truth, the cultures of both Africa and the Americas have shaped each other through a live dialogue that continued beyond the end of the slave trade. In ways easily documented since the eighteenth century, travel by free Africans and African Americans (by which I mean people of African descent throughout the Americas) has continued to shape political identities and cultural practices in North and South America, the Caribbean, and Africa.” (Matory, 2005: 93)

“Thus, this live dialogue between Africa and its American diaspora has produced, if not always harmony, then a set of new, hybrid discourses of self-expression and identity. This article is intended

⁹ On Miles Davis: “...when asked what he’d accomplished, the jazz trumpeter and composer replied with, “Well, I guess I changed music five or six times,” and it wasn’t an idle boast.” <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/don-chedle-why-i-had-to-make-my-miles-davis-movie-53222/>

to illustrate the historical and ongoing influence of this dialogue on the political identities, cultural practices, and, in particular, the religious practices of African Americans.” (Matory, 2005: 94)

It’s an intentional imagined state to consider these two artists in conversation with each other. Creative work and output allows them to be in concert across space and lifetime, finding the nodes of commonality and overlap, complimenting inspiration and adaptation of style and sound into the creation process, garments and the vision they carry for those that wear them. This dialogue is in fact one-directional in this case, as a physical Miles Davis cannot respond to the creations of Loua, however it is imagined in concert for a certain Miles in a particular evolution in his life, career and stage presence that Loua’s creations seem to fit. “He had a particular way that he walked in the world, one that bled into everything that he touched.” (Stradford, 2020: 8)

I’d like to evolve a definition of “transatlantic dialogue” in this case – one that specifically positions the synergies of two Black men across the diaspora in alignment to find the common core that leads to both of their creative successes. Davis’ style, like many well-known musicians, became noteworthy as he emerged onto the jazz scene, and over the decades went through a series of shifts. The imagery created along a backdrop of sound become the elements that can be picked up – these are the pieces that service Loua in his lane of creativity. The visual, sound and lifestyle combined echo a set of steps that are in communion with an understood experience – to be Black and free in the world, while pushing new ideas forward. This throttle of culture is received by the tastemaker able to create within this creative language.

Transatlantic Dialogue Defined

As described in the NMAfA Exhibit “Transatlantic Dialogue: Contemporary Art in and Out of Africa”

Over the centuries, a dialogue evolved across the Atlantic as Africans came to the New World and blacks from America returned to their continent of origin. An aesthetic conversation has recently developed between African and African American artists as they work from different perspectives to reconcile their African identity and heritage within the currents of contemporary art...Similarities of style as well as diversity of expression emerge from a shared African heritage.

Color, pattern and rhythm, improvisation and spiritual awareness are some of the elements found in the work of these artists. Many explore the performatory aspects of culture through music or ritual suggestions. Some artists respond to environmental and historical circumstances in their work. Most acknowledge a sense of spirituality that echoes older African sensibilities. Perhaps it is telling that the works [in this exhibition] cannot easily be identified as either African or African American; they are all part of the same aesthetic conversation. (NMAfA)

While a shared name (*The Birth of Cool*) does not necessarily qualify them as being a part of the same aesthetic conversation, it is within these similar veins of work constructed – like contemporary art – that places both a musical figure and a fashion designer in this same aesthetic conversation.

This is just one of many examples that continue to expand the narrative of the African Diaspora, its power, its creativity, and its future. Enabled by technological accessibility across all fronts (music references, tools, information, imagery), the depths of connectivity are enhanced by the accessibility to connect ideas to real thoughts, images and sounds of past, and across the Atlantic.

This ability to deeply connect and execute a tangible set of products designed for consumption add to the value of the collection. To have a contextual perspective that also resonates with the identity of the designer and creator deeply authenticates the product to another level beyond typical clothing production. While Aristide and Miles come from two different places and times, their shared experience in style, cool and Blackness crosses over in a deeply impactful way. Both Miles and Aristide share deep influence of suiting and style from their fathers – both prominent professionals in their respective cities, East St. Louis and Abidjan. Miles Davis' father was a dentist and entrepreneur, while

Loua's father worked in the treasury sector of the government in Côte d'Ivoire, both taking note and influenced by their professional wears. The need and use for purposeful dress in their respective eras for Black men, specifically suiting, supported their human need to be recognized and regarded as whole beings worthy of respect, as image holds true to a standard of humanity and self-actualization.

This unique intersection of "birthing cool" described in different ways, yet intersecting at multiple touchpoints between Davis, Loua as Tulloch as artists. The "birth" of something is to give it life, to push out into the world, which is the bedrock of creativity and design. The inspirational ethos of Miles Davis amplified to the world personified the state of jazz in one's mind, lifestyle and complimentary wardrobe. This is best described in the coda of Tulloch's *The Birth of Cool*. It is in this concluding portion of the book where she is able to identify the threads of commonality of her selected images that move through space and time, connected beyond just being Black. It's that they're Black *and* cool, thus grounding the notion that through this lens there is a multitude of meaning and understanding through the power of dressing. That as a part of the human experience, expression is process that is developed in some form of intentionality that holds purpose.

Her research revealed "style narratives of the African diaspora are marked by an aesthetic of presence – to imprint a sense of self on society, culture and history. It has illustrated that to engage in, what is frankly a natural activity of making and defining the self, is not just counter-narrative to the persistent objectification, marginalization and stereotyping of the black body, but is also the undoubted significance of the 'interior dynamic' (Tulloch, 2016: 199 [Quashie, 2012: 6]). Her case studies of styled Black folks over time, space, location and circumstance illuminate their "self-styled

manifestations of inner, personal desires, their need to live by the way they wished to regardless of where they are in the world.” (Tulloch, 2016: 199 [Quashie, 2012:8])

The designer’s choice to answer this call of self-styling, adornment and personal activism is not by default but by choice – one that we get to examine through the design journey of Aristide Loua and his brand Kente Gentlemen. While any designer can make suits, each choice of intentionality to connect with self, identity, community and origin that is specifically global and African, meets Tulloch’s cooling where it leaves off – the designers’ sensory ability to lead those to dress in something that holds deep meaning and connectivity as they place it on their body. This facet of African design that crystallizes its unique offering; something a standard purchase from a contemporary or Eurocentric luxury brand cannot access in this regard. Because history, integrity and lineage matter, in this case, they will never be able to answer this call in the way that contemporary African fashion can to meet these detailed desires explained in Tulloch’s examination.

If Tulloch’s “style narratives are part of the creative, human process of living,” then this seeks to add connective tissue to the analysis of the human design process. As she states, “in the realms of what is has meant, and what it continues to mean to be Black in the world, the style narratives of the African diaspora deserve to be recognized as an intellectual materialization of reason.” (Tulloch, 2016: 201)

The design conversation moves this forward into the continued notion and cases for valuation of design and fashion in a material sense, that has the potential to shape shift industry across the continent, and move en force with the systems of commerce that have not even reached their potential at the minimum, let alone the maximum. Part of this reasoning is due to these forces having minimal

communication with each other in a real and meaningful way. The renaissance of this dialogue is just beginning.

Conclusion

“African fashion, once cast to the periphery of the global economy, has, since the turn of the twenty-first century, undergone a seismic shift. Eclectic and nuanced, the contemporary African fashion scene is dynamic and in constant flux...A new wave of contemporary designers are charting new frontiers and courting the attention of global media. They are adept at preserving and promoting indigenous African cultures, accomplished through excellent craftsmanship and quality standards that resonate with luxury consumers around the world.” (Nimo, 2022: 95)

Pop culture moments propelled from Western media, namely the *Black Panther* franchise (2018 and 2022) and Beyoncé’s *Black Is King* (2020) film and complementary album to *The Lion King*, brought elevated visuals to expand the assumptions of African lifestyle on a global level. The style component of these visuals drove a significant portion of the creative aesthetics and cultural interpretation of these envisioned worlds of Afro-Futurism, expanding the platform for creatives that were simmering in their own regions of the world to global spotlights. Additionally, African musicians are globally on the rise within popular music as the Afrobeat and Amapiano music genres climb global music charts. As fashion and music intertwine, more global visibility to these artists also serve as sites to expand the visibility of contemporary African style. This cultural groundswell continued to expand outlets for African fashion, the V&A Museum¹⁰ in London hosted its first exhibition on African fashion, which took place in the summer of 2022. The exhibition continued its tour to the Brooklyn Museum in 2023, further extending the reach of Africa’s past, present and future contributions to the global fashion landscape in an elevated way.

¹⁰ The V&A Museum, London (Victoria and Albert Museum) is home to approximately 100,000 of fashion objects including buttons, fabrics and fully-finished garments

The value of this cultural vehicle is articulated through the positioning of imagery, storytelling and originality, and cuts across the unique and additive dynamic of the African diaspora. Yet challenges remain for its fashion landscape to realize its full economic potential and seismic global impact beyond media and experiential modes, like museum exhibitions and fashion shows. Many of these barriers to exponential growth are linked to the impact of European colonization and the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Destabilized governments have led to challenges in funding and developing accessible channels for trade and manufacturing amongst African nations themselves. Self-sustaining fashion businesses that can fully employ every business need, while creating profitable sales to outlast generations like their European counterparts have yet to be realized across the continent, although many designers are well on their way to creating this for their own futures.

Unchecked behavior and business practices from established global fashion entities enable challenges in several parts of the African continent. Second-hand fashion and waste are large factors making it difficult to expand regionally specific brands. Best explained in summary in an essay for *Africa Fashion*¹¹, fast fashion waste from the global north holds dire implications for the future of fashion success in Africa: "...these clothes, mostly dumped by donation or sold for pennies, take up a massive amount of space and must be moved quickly. Arriving in Africa, they make up a significant portion of the fashion retail there." (Dolat and Ngumi, 2022: 171) This steep influx of cheaper goods drive down the value of collective clothing offerings in many parts of the African continent, making the competitive landscape increasingly difficult to introduce higher value products into the local market to a larger consumer audience. Without the opportunity for substantial growth of local African brands, Africans are in turn "being denied opportunities...to process [their] own raw materials, as well

¹¹ *Africa Fashion* is the published volume for the V&A Museum exhibition of the same name, *Africa Fashion*

as make and trade [their] own fabric and clothes. This translates to massive losses in terms of jobs; spaces for knowledges acquisition and transfer; the start-up, growth and success of businesses; and contributions to the economic growth of people, households, communities and countries. Meanwhile, the same global entities whose governments took from Africans so long ago continue to experience unchallenged growth in these arenas.” (Dolar and Ngumi, 2022: 171)

Amidst navigating these challenges, fashion entrepreneurs can look to the future with a determined optimism in the continental efforts to strengthen its own networks to service its large population. Looking towards their own “afro-future”, entrepreneurs are tasked with their own business and creative development, as well as navigating the developmental climate towards Africa’s economic goals. “Africa’s population is estimated to be approximately 1.2 billion, spread across 54 countries. [Our] designers are currently being encouraged to explore intra-African trade with a mission to target and access a micro fraction of the population.” (Akerlele, 2022: 190)

Additionally, they are also navigating the digital climate that takes their brands worldwide through technology, connecting them to the double edge sword of connection and exposure. While this can open brands up to opportunities, limited resources can quickly strain a brand to fulfill requests and meet expectations of working with customers and clientele across the world. Protecting the original creative assets developed by African fashion designers amidst competition from large global factories that can create similar knockoffs and a cheaper price can also pose a threat if Africa’s fashion infrastructure cannot protect and enforce its creative property. This is not a problem unique to Africa, but often a threat to small businesses, which operationally, many of Africa’s fashion brands operate on a smaller infrastructure scale.

Fundamental financial support, trade route access and key partnerships across all components of fashion business, trade and manufacturing are vital for exponential growth in the current wave of a uniquely African fashion landscape. Recent and ongoing developments across African nations support the structural framework needed to grow this area of economy, the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement, or AfCFTA agreement, is largely the most influential trade agreement to support the future of creating “one African market.” (AU-AfCFTA.org, 2024). The idea of formally establishing a free trade area across the continent of Africa was agreed upon as priority under the 18th Ordinary Session of the African Union Assembly of Heads and States of Government in 2012. Its goal is to “eliminate trade barriers and boost intra-Africa trade”, and through continued sessions of the African Union, or AU, AfCFTA was adopted into formal agreement in 2019 after being signed by 44 out of 55 African Union Member States (formal trading under the agreement beginning in 2021). The establishment of this agreement bolstered and fueled micro development at the regional and nation-state level, empowering new innovation and new opportunity. As of January 2024, 54 AU Member States have signed the agreement and it remains a steadfast project of the AU’s “long-term development strategy for transforming the continent into a global powerhouse”, enabling the continent’s approximate population of 1.3 billion people to create a single continental market, with an aim to lift 30 million people out of extreme poverty through job creation and economic stimulation. AfCFTA projects a 7% gain in income in Africa by 2035, to approximately \$450 billion.

Fashion, retail and manufacturing play a significant role in this economic vision for Africa, and should continue to receive forward momentum in their development based on these broader economic initiatives designed to unite the continent for economic growth. Collaboration and ease of trade

barriers mean easier access to raw materials needed to produce goods, and expansion of opportunity to manufacture across more regions that enable competitive artisan talent rather than outsource jobs overseas or outside the continent.

Stated within the V&A Museum Africa Fashion Exhibition in 2022, “the African fashion industry is estimated to be worth \$31 billion USD”. While that figure is not estimated as annual figure or within a certain time metric, it should be evaluated against a relative industry comparison: LVMH¹², France’s largest luxury conglomerate inclusive of fashion, alcohol, beauty, fragrance reported revenues of approximately 79.2 billion euros in 2022, and increased to 86.2 billion euros in 2023, with fashion and leather goods making up approximately 49 percent of this revenue total year over year. This conglomerate is made up of 75 prestigious brands and a retail network of over 6,000 stores worldwide. For Africa’s fashion industry as a whole, it seems as though a \$31 billion valuation in fashion alone is just the starting point. With long-term commitment to developing trade, networks, and brands across the African continent, there is significant value-add to the global economy by continuing the effort to sustain and grow African fashion brands collectively and establish them in the global marketplace while also catering to its own population. There is only endless opportunity ahead for growth and development.

What does could this mean for Aristide Loua and *Kente Gentlemen*? Loua continues to be an advocate for African fashion and the role it plays in the development in African identity and economy. His role extends beyond design and managing the operational capacity of his business, but also requires him

¹² Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, a French conglomerate of luxury goods and consumer brands

to consistently demonstrate the wins and challenges of what he has created to open the doors for future opportunity and development. His positionality as an influential creative, business leader and spokesperson takes on new heights that exemplify the progress and evolution of Africa's creative talent and their ability to make community and economic impact in their respective regions.

From a consumer perspective, finding a brand that authentically connects the clothing one wears to both history, culture and future development efforts of Africa's future holds a valuable qualitative feature that easily can drive audiences with interest to vote with their dollars. If audiences desire for brands like Loua's to continue forward, then support must be leveraged in the form of purchasing power.

Further research on this topic suggests more investigation across other African fashion brands, measuring their contributions and understanding the opportunities and challenges unique to their community and region of the continent. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to evaluate the quantitative and qualitative elements of comparable fashion brands outside of Africa in contrast with African fashion brands, further analysis would support this thesis in more specific economic terms related to amount of start-up capital, sales volume, export volume, job creation, waste creation¹³, investment funding, profitability, business credit and length of time in business. Further evaluation of the progress of AfCFTA, and other African fashion initiatives in relation to African fashion brand progress would also give deeper insight to the industry's trajectory.

¹³ Waste creation refers to overproduced, unsold, or damaged garments intended to be offloaded or dumped

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