Course Description

Fabric is at the heart of cultural production in African spaces. From birth, to initiations, to weddings, to funerals, fabric binds together communities, adorning families, and providing the basis for personal wealth. Through the lens of fabric, we will examine the meanings of diaspora, empire, modernity, post-colonialism and globalization for everyday people. Course participants will examine the history behind plant fibers and dyes, weaving, and construction techniques, as well as issues of industrialization, intellectual property rights, sustainability, and workplace health. Course participants will also learn to “read” textiles in class and watch several films on African fashion.

This course explores emerging research on the social history of textiles and clothing, with special reference to cases in Africa and comparative material from Asia, the Americas and Europe. It seeks to integrate this work with ongoing debates in the field of science and technology studies on innovation, and technology transfer and appropriation.

Rationale

Increasingly, we consume digital objects, and spend our time in virtual spaces. Clothing (alongside food and the built environment) remains one of the visible and tangible signs of human existence. Textile goods from today are material objects with long histories of continuity, change and exchange. Particularly, in African settings the history of cloth provides a window into major shifts in cultural values and social relations over time. Cloth and clothing, and the discourses they inspire, also provide rich historical data where written documentation is scarce. They provide important evidence of patterns of garment construction and consumption among women.

The primary objective for this course is to stimulate creative interpretations of fabric and fabric history among participants. Readings and assignments focus on these underlining questions:

1. How can old cloth and clothing serve as an archive for historical research?
2. How have processes of manufacturing cloth and clothing changed over time?
3. Who owns cloth and clothing designs?

These are fundamental themes in historical and anthropological scholarship which course participants may apply to other areas of investigation in other parts of the world.

Course Goals

This is a reading-intensive seminar. Close study and discussion of books, articles, websites, material objects, and required films will allow course participants to:

- Gain extensive knowledge of the comparative history of fabric use and manufacture in African countries.
• Learn strategies for conducting social histories of material objects, of which fabrics are but one example.
• Learn strategies for creating a digital bibliographic database.

Assignments

Course participants will be graded on their:
Contributions to Class Discussions ................................................................. 40%
Presentations and Response Papers ......................................................... 20%
Short Research Paper and Bibliographic Database ........................................ 40%

• The main goal of this course is for everyone to come prepared and ready to participate each week (40 points).
• In addition, participants will select two weeks to present a 5 minute critique of the readings at the start of class and to lead us in a discussion of the case study for that day. In addition, they will write a 2 page commentary on the readings for their chosen weeks (due on Canvas by 12:30 pm on the day of presentation). Include several questions you will use to start off our discussions (20 points total).
• Participants will write a short research paper on the history of a particular style of cloth or clothing using primary sources available on campus, in the Austin Area, or online (10 pages). They will also create bibliographic databases documenting readings conducted for their final paper. These may take the form of a classic annotated bibliography, or may be made using digital platforms such as Endnote, Refworks, or Zotero (40 points total).

Unexcused absences will result in the drop of half a letter grade (-5 points). Excused absences require advance notice to the instructor, and a written statement from a physician in the case of serious illness. Alert the instructor if you anticipate any conflict with course meetings for religious reasons.

Grading Scale:
A 93-100%
A- 90-92%
B+ 87-89%
B 83-86%
B- 80-82%
C+ 77-79%
C 73-76%
C- 70-72%
D 69-60%
Failing: Below 60%
Books

Please note course books may be checked out from PCL Reserves.


Outline of Readings (subject to change)

WEEK 1 – Aug 24  Understanding Cloth in Africa and Beyond

Welcome and Introduction to the Course.

WEEK 2 – Aug 31  Theorizing Textiles as Texts


See also:
Green, Rebecca L., “Ch. 9 From Cemetery to Runway: Dress and Identity in Highland Madagascar,” in Contemporary African Fashion

WEEK 3 – Sep 7       Dyeing: Indigo


See also:


WEEK 4 – Sep 14      Cotton and Freedom


WEEK 5 – Sep 21      Weaving and Printing Fabric by Hand


See also:


WEEK 6 – Sep 28 Printing Fabric with Machines


Hoogenboom, Marcel, Duco Bannick, and Willem Trommel. "From local to grobal, and back." Business History 52, no. 6 (2010): 932-54.


WEEK 7 – Oct 5 Dyeing Fabric

McKinley, Catherine E. Indigo: in search of the color that seduced the world. New York: Bloomsbury, 2011.

WEEK 8 – Oct 12 Wearing & Sewing Cloth


See also:
Gott, “Ch. 1 The Ghanaian Kaba: Fashion that Sustains Culture,” in Contemporary African Fashion
Grabaski, Joanna, “Ch. 2 The Visual City: Tailors, Creativity, and Urban Life in Dakar, Senegal,” in *Contemporary African Fashion*


WEEK 9 – Oct 19  Spring Break (no class)

WEEK 10 – Oct 26  Dressing and Colonialism


Gondola, Didier, “Ch. 10 La Sape Exposed! High Fashion among Lower-Class Congolese Youth,” in *Contemporary African Fashion*.


WEEK 11 – Nov 2  Making Fashion African: Post-Independence


See also:


Bring a one paragraph description of your planned paper to class. Include a tentative title and the question you hope to address.

WEEK 12 – Nov 9  Prospects for Textile Industries in African Countries: Reuse


See also:
Hansen, “Ch. 3 Secondhand Clothing and Fashion in Africa,” in *Contemporary African Fashion*.

Film in class: Hanna Shell and Vanessa Bertozzi, *Secondhand (Pepe)* 24 mins.

**WEEK 13 – Nov 16**

Prospects for Textile Industries in African Countries: Manufacturing


– available online at: [http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/03796/03796toc.html](http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/03796/03796toc.html)

Student-led discussions of research in progress

**WEEK 14 – Nov 23**

Comparisons: Course Participant Research

Thanksgiving

**WEEK 15 – Nov 30**

Comparisons: Course Participant Research

Discussion of paper drafts in class

**WEEK 15 – Dec 7**

Final Paper (10 pages) due Friday Dec 8 by 5 pm on Canvas

No formal class meeting- independent writing