

# “We Have Always Been Fashionable”- The Significance of Fashion in Accra

CHRISTOPHER L. RICHARDS



As a 2011-2012 FLAS fellow, I had the opportunity to complete my final semester of advanced Twi in Accra, Ghana. In addition to lessons with a Twi instructor, my temporary residence in Accra allowed me to speak Twi on a daily basis. I engaged countless Ghanaians in conversation, quickly recognizing the significance of speaking Twi. Many Ghanaian fashion designers viewed my linguistic abilities as a novelty, which inadvertently made me more approachable and aided my integration into the fashion community. By the end of my six month stay, I was able to negotiate a cheaper cab fare than my eighty-two year old Ghanaian “Auntie.” At that moment, I knew my FLAS experience abroad was a success!

My experience abroad also permitted the continuation of my dissertation research on Ghanaian fashion, which I began investigating in the summers of 2009 and 2010. I re-established connections with several designers from previous trips, including Bee Arthur, Ben Nonterah, and Kofi Ansah. I expanded the scope of my research to

include emerging fashion designers, including Brigitte Merki, Ajepomaa Mensah (Ajepomaa Design Gallery), Aisha Obuobi (Christie Brown), Aya Morrison, Nelly Aboagye (Duaba Serwa), and the design team known as PISTIS. I spent considerable time with these individuals, accompanying them on trips to buy fabric and other materials, as well as spending time in their boutiques, observing and interviewing their clientele. Through these experiences and my active participation in Accra’s broader fashion scene, I was able to understand the current significance of fashion in Accra and how Ghana’s younger generation of fashion designers are striving to reinterpret factory printed cloth into garments that reflect their own multicultural, globalized identities.

With the assistance of several contemporary fashion designers, I began exploring the historical significance of fashion in Accra. I interviewed the family of Parisian-trained Chez Julie, arguably Ghana’s first fashion designer following independence. I spent a considerable amount of time at the Daily Graphic archives, one of Accra’s oldest newspapers, researching how fashion was presented and discussed from 1953 to the early 21st century. Both the newspaper archives and Chez Julie’s family attested to the continued importance of fashion to Accra’s citizens, suggesting Ghanaians have actively engaged in both global and local fashion for decades.

I established an informal partnership with the fashion design program at Accra Polytechnic to gain perspective on how fashion is taught in technical schools. The lecturers allowed me to participate in students’ critiques and attend their final fashion show at the National Theater.

Through these interactions, I observed how students were influenced by local designers and how a career in fashion design is viewed as a means of obtaining success in Ghana, with many youth dreaming of obtaining celebrity status via their fashionable creations.

One of the highlights of my experiences in Ghana was having the honor of interviewing former First Lady Nana Konadu. We discussed the types of garments she wore during her husband’s presidency and why she favored wearing local styles and materials over Western attire, suggesting the power of her dress in relation to her and her husband’s political identities.

Prior to my study abroad in Ghana, I published a chapter in the Samuel P. Harn’s exhibition catalog *Africa Interweave: Textile Diasporas*. Last summer, I was selected to participate in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History’s Summer Institute in Museum Anthropology (SIMA), where I researched Ghanaian textiles from the Venice and Alastair Lamb collection.

*Christopher Richards is a PhD candidate in the School of Art & Art History and a former FLAS fellow (2010-2012). He is currently funded by a School of Art & Art History Alumni Fellowship.*