

African Fashion: Innovation, Social Status, and Tradition in Mali

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This summer I spent a month in Mali, where I pursued my research on African fashion. I worked in three cities: Bamako, the capital, and Timbuktu and Djenne, cities famous for their rich histories as centers of trade and Islamic scholarship. I investigated two embroidery traditions as part of my research on the country's art and fashion markets. Each of these styles of embroidery is associated with a specific garment and a specific form of male status. One style, used to make large robes called *tilbi*, is closely linked to the status of piety and elderhood in the Sahel. *Tilbi* have been adorned with the same symbolic abstract motifs for over a century, yet skilled embroiderers still innovate within the restrictions of longstanding custom.

The other type of embroidery, called Ghana Boy or Bambara embroidery, is completely different in its appearance and intention. Tunics embroidered in this style date to the 1960s and '70s, when they were created by young men who traveled to Ghana as labor migrants. They are adorned with fanciful figures, airplanes, motorcycles, and bold colorful patterns, and they are associated with the special status of young male adventurers who return home with exotic goods and stories. These two styles of dress provide insights into creativity, conceptions of status, and the ways in which artists and consumers negotiate the balance between precedent and innovation.

In Timbuktu, I interviewed embroiderers and, on behalf of UF's Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, I negotiated the commission of a *tilbi* that exemplifies the city's classic embroidery style from the important embroiderer Baba Djitteye. The robe will be featured in a 2010 exhibition, along with documentation from my work with Djitteye. In Djenne, I interviewed and documented the work of two embroiderers who still make garments in the Ghana Boy style, which has largely fallen out of use. In both cities, I also spoke with authorities on local culture and history.



In Bamako, the country's capital and home to a small network of professional fashion designers, I pursued my research on a fashion market that intersects with Western fashion (unlike the *tilbi* and Ghana Boy embroidery, which don't share the same market as Bamako's professional designers). I met with and interviewed designers, artists, consumers, and experts on Mali's clothing traditions. I also made use of the country's national archives, viewed collections, and presented a lecture on my embroidery research to an audience of Malians and expatriates under the auspices of the U.S. Embassy's Public Affairs Office.



This research is one element of a larger project focused on clothing as an art form that moves—garments, dress styles, and images readily cross cultural boundaries and conceptual categories. As they move, clothing styles are often transformed as artists and consumers adapt them to new functions in new markets. I have conducted research on fashion produced by Africans, and on Africa's influence on Western fashion in both historical and contemporary contexts. I have found that clothing, whether in Timbuktu or in Paris, provides significant insights into shifting identities and conceptions of distant cultures.

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