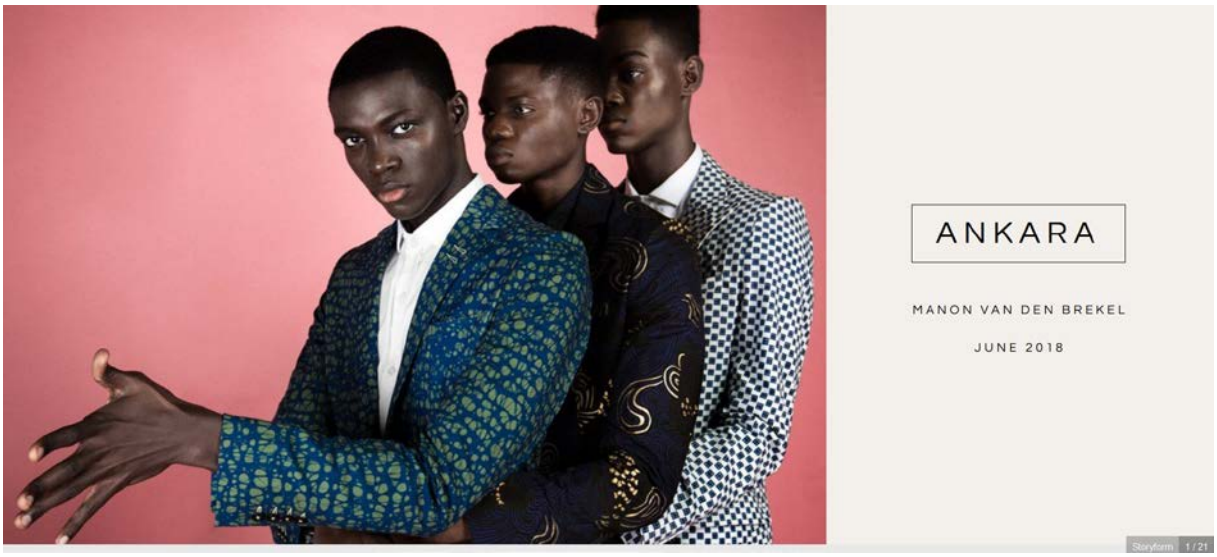


Introduction

When looking at connections between Africa and Europe, the fabric called *Ankara* is a particularly interesting one. The fabric is famous for its colorful, repetitive print. Other common names for Ankara are African wax print, Dutch wax print and wax Hollandais. As these names already suggest, there is a strong connection between Africa and the Netherlands if we look at the origins of Ankara. Although the wax print originated in Indonesia and the Netherlands, it is a 'typically' African product, mostly worn by African people.

The popularity of wax print is now being 'exported' back to Europe and America. The African diaspora uses African fabrics, but also white people started using Ankara. When fashion designer Stella McCartney used Ankara in the collection she showed during the Paris Fashion Week in October 2017, she was accused of cultural appropriation. A couple of months later, people of African descent wore wax print clothes to the Black Panther movie as a sign of pride.

These two examples show that using Ankara is not the same for black people as it is for white people. This website tries to find out how people of different ethnic backgrounds use the same fabric. Is Ankara a product that connects Europeans and Africans, or is it a product that makes visible the socio-economic differences and the power imbalance between the two continents? And can white people wear wax print, or is it off-limits if you are not African?

Bringing African wax print to Africa

Nothing looks more typically African than the colorful clothes made of wax print fabric. However, the origin of the wax print does not lay in Africa, but in Indonesia. During the Dutch occupation of Indonesia in the colonial time, Dutch traders copied the Indonesian technique of making batik fabric. Halfway through the 19th century, they adjusted this technique to make the production process less labor-intensive, and thus the wax print was born.

The most well-known Dutch wax print factory nowadays is Vlisco, a company based in the city of Helmond. In 1844, Pieter Fentener van Vlissingen took over this fathers cotton

printing mill in Helmond. Two years later, he renamed it P.F. van Vlissingen & Co., which later became Vlisco. In the 1850s and 1860s the imitation batik produced by P.F. van Vlissingen & Co. became very popular in Indonesia, as did the imitation batik of multiple other Dutch companies. But in the late 1860s, the Indonesian market for imitation batik saw a rapid decline, partly because the competition of local companies increased.

By then, not only the Dutch had specialized in producing wax print fabrics. Other Europeans like the Swiss and British had also learned how to make wax prints. When the demand for wax print fabrics in Indonesia declined, European traders started introducing this fabric to the country of Ghana, which was then known as the Gold Coast.

Before this, they already traded different textiles on the Gold Coast. Textiles were the largest export product of European traders to West Africa. Before the abolition of slavery, textiles were used to buy enslaved people with.

Also P.F. van Vlissingen & Co. started exporting its products to West Africa. The first known order from this part of the world for the Helmond based company dates from 1876. The wax print became immensely popular in West Africa. Nowadays, the fabric is not only commonly used in West Africa, but also in many sub-Saharan countries.

In 2012, Dutch Profiles made a six minute documentary on Vlisco, which can be watched on the next page.

<DOCUMENTARY: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6su1wjWwrQo>

When Europeans introduced wax print to Ghana in the second half of the nineteenth century, textiles already played a major role in Ghanaian society. As Paulette Young points out in her *Ghanaian Woman and Dutch Wax Prints*, 'cloth was widely circulated as a form of currency in pre-colonial Africa'. Nowadays, textiles are still perceived as valuable possessions in West Africa, she writes:

Waxprints are prized possessions bestowed at life changing events, such as coming-of-age ceremonies, customary marriage rites, and baby-naming ceremonies. They also store and evoke memories and are collected by a woman over the course of her life.

Ghana has a long tradition of name giving to cloth, and cloth with names is seen as more valuable than cloth without. Also Ankara is named and is seen as particularly valuable. Market women play a major role in this naming process. Most of the names given to cloth refer to a proverbial expression, but names may also commemorate a certain event or person. To West African women, therefore, wax prints are not just nice looking, colorful fabrics. Every print carries its own name and message, which makes it possible for women to send a message by wearing a particular print. Young gives an example:

A woman may wear an outfit that bears the image of small chairs with the proverb "Wote me hoasem a, fa akonnwa (If you want to talk about me, take a stool and listen)" to provoke a co-wife or rival. […] The meanings tied to the cloth names are the *visual voice* of women's experiences.

Not only in Ghana wax prints play an important role in society. The popularity of the fabric spread throughout all of West Africa and also in many sub-Saharan countries wax prints are commonly used. In East Congo, for example, wax print is omnipresent.

<FOUR PICTURES>

The information on the history of the wax print and its introduction on the West African coast comes from *The waxprint, its origin and its introduction on the Gold Coast* by Willem Ankersmit. The process of name giving in Ghana is explained in detail in *Ghanaian Woman and Dutch Wax Prints: The Counter-appropriation of the Foreign and the Local Creating a New Visual Voice of Creative Expression* by Paulette Young. The website of Vlisco gives information on the history of the company. The pictures of Ankara fabric in the Democratic Republic of the Congo used in this chapter were taken in 2013 by Manon van den Brekel.

Ankara in other parts of the world

Although Ankara was originally produced for the African market, it also became popular in other parts of the world. As Ayushi Dhawan points out in her paper *Wax Hollandais and Ghanaian Social Institutions: Looking through Vlisco advertisements* celebrities like the Barbadian Rihanna and the American sisters Beyoncé (in the picture on the right) and Solange Knowles played a significant role in popularizing Ankara. By wearing clothes made of wax print fabric, they helped bringing Ankara 'into the realm of global fashion and consequently shooting up its sales'.

<PICTURE BEYONCÉ>

By exporting Ankara to other parts of the world, the fabric also became a means for people of African descent to express pride. Wearing wax prints can be a way to show that one is proud of ones African descent and cultural heritage. This symbolic use of Ankara was particularly clear when Marvel's movie Black Panther was released early 2018. It is the first Marvel movie with a predominantly black cast. The story is set in the imaginary African country of Wakanda, a technologically extremely advanced place. The movie depicts black people as strong, sophisticated, merciful and heroic. Since Hollywood movies usually depict black people in a negative way – uneducated, criminal – , Marvel was praised for showing that black people can be heroes too. Fans started sharing on Twitter what the movie means to them, under the hashtag #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe, pointing out the importance of representation.

The costumes in Black Panther are an important part of showing the greatness of Africa. Costume designer Ruth Carter based them on multiple African types of traditional clothing, including African wax print. On the next page there is a screenshot, in which we can see two women wearing a dress made of Ankara fabric.

<TWO BLACK PANTHER PICTURES>

But not only in the movie Ankara was used to show the greatness of Africa. Also visitors who went to the movie theatre to watch Black Panther wore African textiles as a sign of pride. Ankara was one of the used fabrics. Many visitors posted pictures of themselves, wearing African style clothes.

<TWO TWITTER PICTURES>

White people and wax prints

Although originally created in Indonesia and the Netherlands, Ankara clearly is an African product with great symbolic value to Africans and people of African descent from all over the world. So what if white people start using and wearing Ankara?

Fashion designer Stella McCartney made use of wax prints in her 2018 spring collection, which she showed during the Paris Fashion Week in October 2017. For five of her designs she used Vlisco fabrics. “Stella McCartney brought her refreshing fashion vision to the Parisian catwalk, interpreting our classic designs into new inspiring styles”, Vlisco wrote on its website. The five Ankara designs McCartney created, were shown on the runway by four white women and one Asian woman. In the entire show there were only a few black women on the runway.

For her use of Ankara on white models and for the lack of black representation on the runway, McCarney was accused of cultural appropriation. In the first two and a half minutes of the clip on the next page, all five models who wore wax prints will pass.

<VIDEO: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y94vasSlMwA, start at 4:00>

On Twitter people showed their displeasure by posting comments on the show of Stella McCartney. The fact that there was only one African model on her runway was brought up. Also the theme ‘stealing’ was brought up: there were no credits for African designers and McCartney made it look like she discovered the prints herself, according to the people on Twitter.

But not everyone looked at it that way. The website *African Prints in Fashion* published an article in which the author tried to look at the case from a positive perspective. The US-based Nigerian designer Jane Ogbe-Makinwa responded as follows: “I always infuse African fabrics into my designs (a little bit, sometimes more), and my desire is that all skin colors/races wear my pieces. I’ve also worked with a Vlisco company in the past and I see a lot of white people come into the fabric store, appreciating our colorful African wax but many felt overwhelmed by the many vibrant colors/patterns in a single fabric (which we love), and others just bought to frame it up as artwork in their houses, etc. So, seeing the same fabrics used by a white designer, to me is a breakthrough…because the more it’s seen, the more comfortable they’ll feel wearing it, and soon they’ll look for better designs that are even more affordable. I see it as an advantage to us eventually…as African designers.”

<TWITTER PICTURES>

To understand why some people say it is cultural appropriation when a white fashion designer uses wax print, we first need to understand what cultural appropriation is. As Anousha Nzume writes in her book *Hallo witte mensen*, cultural appropriation can be described as a situation in which ‘a majority group in society takes over a cultural element from a marginalized group’. This can be a use, tradition, look, symbol, language or other cultural characteristic.

Typically, the members of the majority group appropriating the cultural element, lack any knowledge of the culture of the marginalized group and do not reflect on their own

privilege. On top of that, the cultural element that is being appropriated, often has been a subject of a negative stereotype. But when a member of the majority group uses this cultural element, it suddenly becomes *cool* or *edgy*. Cultural appropriation is different from cultural exchange. Cultural exchange is a situation in which different groups in society 'share culture with each other when the balance of power is equal'.

There are loads of examples of cultural appropriation by white people. Celebrities like Kylie Jenner and Miley Cyrus wearing cornrows for example, making them 'fashionable'. While black women have been discriminated against for wearing this typically black hair style. The cultural appropriation of hip-hop is another example. Jason Rodriquez writes about this phenomenon in his *Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop*. Rodriquez conducted research at twenty hip-hop shows, most of which took place in Northampton, a 90 percent white college town. He conducted thirty-two interviews with white audience members and seventeen follow-up interviews. Only one hip-hop enthusiasts, Ryan, acknowledged the salience of race in his own life and popular culture:

In some ways I feel like a hypocrite by talking about how much I love hip-hop, because I sort of feel like it doesn't belong to me. […] I don't want to see hip-hop taken away from African American culture because I think it's such an important piece. […] White culture had already taken so much that used to belong to other people and now we call our own.

But Ryan was the exception. As Rodriquez writes, 'most of the audience has hit on a rhetorical strategy that allows them to claim that they are cool people moving in a cultural milieu of blackness while avoiding the white guilt Ryan wrestles with'. Another interviewee, Jeff, said:

What's regarded as black music or white music, it doesn't really matter because it's still music and it still exists not only for a certain group of people, but also for itself. […] And, you know, I think a white person had just as much of a right to discover hip-hop and appreciate it as a black person does.

Back to the Stella McCartney case. Can we say that it was indeed cultural appropriation what she did? There are at least two elements that do point in that direction. First of all, she belongs to a majority group (white people) and she is using a cultural element of a marginalized group (Africans). Second, she does not show any knowledge of or any care for African culture and African people. There are almost no black people on her runway and she did not work together with African designers for her show. It would have been different if she worked together with designers from Africa and if she used a lot of African models.

When analyzing the use of Ankara by white people and the way in which Africans respond to that, there is one other important factor that we have to keep in mind: employment. Vlisco is a major player on the West African market. Its headquarters and its factory are located in Helmond, the Netherlands. This means that Vlisco provides a lot of jobs in the Netherlands based factory, but not in West Africa. On the other hand there are African based companies that produce wax print, but they are struggling because of the huge competition by – among others – Vlisco and Chinese companies. Printex, a company based in Accra, Ghana, is one of the few companies owned by Africans. GTP, another Ghanaian company that manufactures Ankara, is part of the Vlisco group. The same goes for brands like Woodin and Uniwax. GTP and Woodin fabrics are produced in Ghana and Uniwax fabrics are produced in Ivory Coast. This means they do provide local jobs, but they are not African owned.

Furthermore, there are a lot of very talented African designers, who cannot charge nearly as much for their creations as Stella McCartney does. A lot of African designers use Instagram to sell their products, as does this designer and this designer.

So, does all this mean that wax prints are off-limits for white people? Can they never use or wear Ankara? And what does Vlisco think about this discussion? Listen to the podcast on the next page to hear what Vlisco has to say and what Africans and people of African descent think.

<PODCAST: https://soundcloud.com/user-371261861/african-wax-print>

Conclusion

African wax print is an African product. There can hardly be any doubt about that. Although it originated in Indonesia and the Netherlands, it has been internalized into the lives of (West) African people. Ankara cloth is named in Africa and it takes an important place in ceremonies and rituals. The fabric is also used to show African pride.

But can white people also use and wear Ankara like Africans do? It is difficult to provide an unambiguous answer to that question. Vlisco – of course – says 'yes' to that question. But Africans and people of African descent are more hesitant to say that white people can use wax print like black people do. Some would say that it is 'borrowing' and that it is a normal thing to do in a creative industry, while others would automatically call it cultural appropriation.

In the case of Stella McCartney there are strong arguments to call her use of wax print cultural appropriation. But what if a white woman gets a piece of Ankara from her husband or her family in law? Would that still be cultural appropriation? A lot of people would probably say it is not.

Whether it is appropriate or not for a white person to use wax print, depends on the situation. It depends on where the person got the fabric, if he or she knows the history of the fabric and is aware of the power imbalance between Africa and the Western world, and if the person actually cares about Africa and Africans. This means that wax print is not completely off-limits for white people, but they do have to meet certain requirements before most Africans are ok with them using it.

What the history of Ankara and the contemporary use of this fabric by Africans and Europeans shows, is that it is a fabric that strongly connects Africa and Europe. Sometimes in a positive way and sometimes in a negative way. The debate about the use of wax print by white people shows how great the power imbalance between Africa and Europe is, and it shows the socio-economic inequality between Africans and Europeans.