



Pathe'o

Pathé'

Un créateur de mode
depuis 1971

Edition Patrick Frey
No.323

Pathé'0

Un créateur de mode
depuis 1971

Editors

Pathé'0
Flurina Rothenberger
Hammer
Catherine Morand

With photographs by

Ben Idriss Zoungrana
Flurina Rothenberger
Nuits Balnéaires
Saïdi Mamadou Ouédraogo
Dorris Haron Kasco

With texts by

Catherine Morand
Flurina Rothenberger
Genevieve Hill-Thomas
Anne Grosfilley
Chayet Chiénin
Victoria L. Rovine
Saïdi Mamadou Ouédraogo
Filippe Sawadogo
Célestin Monga
Denise Epoté
Pépita Kragbé-Coulibaly

This book tells the story of Ivorian-Burkinabé fashion designer *Pathé'0* and how he revolutionized fashion and the textile industry in West Africa. We have interwoven interviews with *Pathé'0* and various members of his professional and personal entourage to form an authentic tapestry of his life and work. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved for their contributions to this endeavor. The photographic material used here was drawn from various archives and, in some cases, reworked.

1987/88 Collection	1
Prologue	17
<i>Pathe'0</i> is like the <i>sankofa</i>	23
2016–2021 Collections	27
<i>Pathe'0</i> in conversation	51
<i>Femme d'Afrique</i>	83
An African fashion designer	99
<i>Pathe'0</i> discovers interesting aspects that no one else sees	111
<i>Nuage: A success story</i>	117
The making of <i>Moucheté, Nuage, Tableau,</i> <i>Salade, and Soleil</i>	121
A heritage of know-how	127
The making of <i>faso dan fani</i>	151
Myunan bi jama la ben “Patience builds a country”	157
Preamble to an excerpt: Twenty years beyond <i>bogolan</i>	169
The <i>bogolan</i>	171
The making of <i>bogolan</i>	177
Tradition-based family structures in West Africa	182
The patterns	183
Fashion shows 1987–2021	215
Mrs. <i>Pathe'0</i> : “It’s a brand of love.”	343
Kadré Ouédraogo: My father said, “Your future is in Africa.”	353
The workshop	359
The trophies	391
Outside perspectives	399
2019 Collection	411
The Ivorian New Wave: Between heritage, identity, and emancipation	427
Press archives	443
Supplements	459

Prologue

The scene is emotionally fraught. A little ways away from the village, at the edge of a field of baobabs, a man is kneeling on the ground under the blazing sun, meditating. It's a moment of communion with his ancestors, who are buried there at the feet of the hundred-year-old trees that hold their branches high, reaching towards the sky. Then he stands up, motioning with his head to indicate that his father and mother are buried there too. The village is Guibaré, eighty kilometers from Ouagadougou. The man is *Pathe'*⁰, the great Abidjan-based fashion designer, originally from Burkina Faso, who has helped African fashion gain the distinction and respect it deserves and inspired a whole new generation of African designers. His clothes, which valorize African *savoir-faire*, are worn by a number of public figures and celebrities as well as plenty of average Africans who appreciate these light,

colorful cotton garments, which suit the climate – and their complexion. To understand who *Pathe'0* really is, you've really got to go with him to his native village and watch him sitting outside a hut conversing with the village elders and receiving their blessings, catching up with his family and helping villagers out with a few bucks here, a few bucks there. As he says himself, he hasn't forgotten his roots and everything he's been through since the day he left his native village. He owes his equilibrium, his common sense, his sagacity, if you will, to the bond he's always maintained with his village, his roots, his family. As Philippe Sawadogo, his friend and Burkina Faso's former Minister of Culture, aptly describes him, *Pathe'0* is like a *sankofa*,¹ the mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backwards.

A cultural revolution for Africa?

"*Pathe'0*" is now, above all, a familiar brand in Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, and beyond. This wide range of readily recognizable apparel is the fruit of a constant exploration of materials, colors, and shapes to create things of beauty. At the start of his career, *Pathe'0* worked wonders with wax prints: many people still remember the spectacular outfit he put together out of the Uniwax company's *Oiseau Rare* ["Rare Bird"] *pagne*, for which he won the Ciseaux d'Or [Golden Scissors] fashion contest. He then turned to other fabrics such as *bogolan*, *kita*, and *faso dan fani*, which he worked into African-inspired clothing revisited from a contemporary angle.

He also enlisted dyers, those wizards of color, to dye cotton fabrics he brought in from India, China, Switzerland, and Austria. An ardent advocate of "made in Africa", he regretted that, as soon as it was picked, the fine cotton grown in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Chad was hauled off to the nearest port to be processed in other climes, instead of being woven on the spot there in West Africa.

¹ *Sankofa* is originally a term and symbol used by the Akan people of Ghana. The *sankofa* is usually represented as a bird with its head turned backwards and holding an egg in its beak. It symbolizes the

importance of revisiting knowledge and skills attained in the past and working them into the present in order to make progress.

This great designer doesn't confine his efforts to creating sumptuous clothes, putting on flamboyant fashion shows, and rubbing shoulders with the great and the good. For he always has Africa's well-being at heart and gives a great deal of thought to ways in which to improve the lot of its people. In fact, everything about the continent matters to him. He travels a lot and knows first-hand what Africa has to offer the world. *Pathe'0* advocates nothing short of a cultural revolution to build on Africa's rich resources, its creativity, and know-how.

And how people dress is part of this cultural revolution. One reason meeting Nelson Mandela in 1998 was so important to *Pathe'0* was that Mandela was the first African president to cast off the formality of Western business suits to don colorful, loose-fitting, well-worn clothes created by African designers instead, including *Pathe'0* himself.

The situation has improved since then – but too slowly, in his opinion. Ivorian politicians and yuppies do wear African clothes these days, but only in private, in their own homes or at friends', on the weekends. Then, Monday mornings, they drive back to their air-conditioned offices in dark three-piece suits. In Burkina Faso, on the other hand, *faso dan fani*, the national fabric, is woven domestically and is now worn with pride by people from all walks of life, much to *Pathe'0*'s delight.

Fifty machines and a move

And men and women from all walks of life stream in and out of the *Pathe'0* shop in Treichville all day long. Drop in yourself and you're liable to come across a group of African American women who've come for the latest creations of a young Beninese designer who's following in *Pathe'0*'s footsteps, or the head of an Abidjan art school, a young fashion journalist, or a pensioner

who's been wearing *Pathé*'^o for twenty-five years. People come to admire the latest collections, to choose and order an outfit for a special occasion, or just to say hello to the master of the house and chat with him. What's striking then is the warmth of the reunion with customers who've become friends over the years. *Pathé*'^o remembers everyone, asks about their children, and doesn't hesitate to advise a customer who seems hesitant. People meeting him for the first time commend the humility of this illustrious designer for whom it's a matter of course to get down on his knees to take a customer's measurements, to arrange a fold or two, which sometimes surprises people. In a society in which everyone keeps to their station, following the very precise conventions of the social class to which they belong, *Pathé*'^o is an exception. With a penetrating and amused view of men and women, whatever their social status, he moves from one world to another with ease, and is as approachable and affable to, say, Dior's creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri as he is to a craftsman who walks in to deliver an order, or a parent asking him for help handling a problem.

He owes his standing to constant hard work, as he is wont to repeat, from early morning to late at night. He spent years learning the ropes before taking up fashion design himself, so he sometimes worries about the future of a young generation often all too eager to make it big and make big money fast. This is one reason, he says, why the number of youngsters asking him for apprenticeships has plummeted: young folk are no longer willing to undergo years of "sacrifice."

Pathé'^o likes to remind people that he did it all himself, with no help from others. He started out with a single sewing machine, then acquired a second one, and then a third. The number of sewing machines he owned became a sort of yardstick by which to

measure the growth of the *Pathé*'^o brand. Well, the Treichville workshop now has over fifty machines, on which clothes are stitched together to be worn all over the world. If he's the only great African fashion designer to have built up such a dense network of boutiques, it's precisely because he grew the brand gradually, always covering his back. After all, what's the point of making a name for yourself if you can't meet your customers' orders? *Pathé*'^o also calls the shots in every area of the business – design, production, promotion, and sales. But he dreams of being able to spend more time developing new collections – without having to be directly involved in everything else – the way it's done at major European fashion houses, where the business is divided up into clearly distinct departments.

Pathé'^o's business model belongs to an economic environment that is often inscrutable to the uninitiated, mixing the so-called "formal" and "informal" sectors with consummate skill. Dozens of men and women all over Côte d'Ivoire and several other African countries work for *Pathé*'^o. Many craftspeople in the "informal" sector provide the artisanal know-how. *Pathé*'^o is the conductor, as it were, who organizes the alchemy between all these specialized crafts and trades to turn out clothes that perfectly blend tradition and modernity.

Pathé'^o is marking the 50th anniversary of his career by moving from the working-class district of Treichville to the residential Riviéra Palmeraie area in Abidjan. In May 2021, he'll be inaugurating the new headquarters and the *Pathé*'^o foundation dedicated to supporting young talents in fashion. He is turning the page, starting a new chapter now with plenty of new prospects and projects. So the adventure goes on.

Pathé'0
is like the *sankofa*

Pathé'0 has never forgotten where he's from. He's like the *sankofa*, the legendary bird which, when taking flight, turns its head around to look back. I think he has always moved ahead by looking back to his roots, which is where he draws his strength. I think this humility, this desire to keep looking back to where he came from, has propelled him forwards. Along with his thoroughgoing knowledge of tradition, especially that of the Mossi, the ethnic group in Burkina to which he belongs. He left his village at the age of fifteen, but his knowledge of the Mossi region is richer than that of many who've lived there their whole life long. He was raised by his grandfather. In our country, they say those raised by an old person receive a form of wisdom in return, with which *Pathé'0* is abundantly endowed. He's also ageless. They say that when you love your job, when you're always asking

questions of yourself, you're always twenty years old. I think *Pathé*⁰ is an eternal twenty year old. And that's extraordinary. What's more, Pathé always has time for others – unlike the *toubabs* [whites] who wear watches but never have the time. *Pathé*⁰ is like my grandmother: when I'd go to see her, she'd say, "My son, you don't have a watch, so you must have time for me."

*Pathé*⁰ has this dynamic.

*Pathé*⁰ spent the latter half of the twentieth century in Côte d'Ivoire working essentially on wax prints, which were known as "Dutch fabrics" back then. He took that as his basis, his launch pad. Once he'd reached cruising speed, he shifted into supersonic speed and re-created other dynamics. Then, still drawing inspiration from his country, he returned to his roots. I think he's attained a dynamic today where he's free from any constraints. He started with the basics, struggled, then took off. They say clothes don't make the man, but feathers make the bird. He found rare birds like Nelson Mandela as well as simpler folks, too. Then he explored another dimension, mixing genres and fabrics. He'd put just a bit of *faso dan fani*¹ on the collar, on the sleeve and pocket, like a little lemon peel on a glass of Coke, which enabled him to enter, step by step and without any noise, into another dynamic. He's got creativity in his blood. As a boy in the village of Guibaré, he knew the weavers who made *faso dan fani*, saw the cotton that was grown in the surrounding fields and then spun by hand, watched the Mossi peddlers pass through the village and continue on their way. He was brought up on all this.

He thinks ahead, and his analyses of our region, the Great Sahel, the countries along the loop of the Niger, are very astute. He looks sees beyond the first impression. Much to my delight, he's never waded into partisan politics, for he has always considered himself an African, someone who's above partisan rivalries. He's a consummate diplomat. He has a knack for making

things easily comprehensible, and never raises his voice. He's grateful to Côte d'Ivoire, his adopted country, but never forgets his roots. What's more, he's not attached to money, that's not what drives him. He's got plenty of "credit," of personal goodwill with those who know him, and he takes good care of it. That's why I deeply respect Pathé.

One day in 2016, when I was still Burkina Faso's Minister of Culture, he called to say, "Mr. Minister, I'm going to my village to put on a fashion show there, in that natural setting, with its traditional local elements. I'd like you to come." I said to myself, "How can the man who dresses the who's who of Abidjan and beyond hold a fashion show in his little village?" Naturally, I accepted because I liked the idea, and I can't refuse Pathé anything anyway. It was a marvelous experience to see such a procession of gorgeous models in that setting, way out there in the sticks, in the village of Guibaré. I treasure the pictures I shot there and I'm very careful not to delete them on my cell phone.

And I'll let you in on a secret: on the way back, I bought some smoked fish from villagers by the side of the road. They'd caught it in a little local reservoir, and it's the best fish in Burkina! Ever since, whenever I go to Kongoussi, I make a detour to pick up some more of that fish. Which just goes to show that life is full of surprises!

We experienced FESPACO together when we were both very young. *Pathé*⁰ brought fashion to the festival some twenty-five years ago, and he still takes part in every FESPACO edition, showing his latest creations there. He insists on coming, so as to breathe the air of this creative realm in which creators of all sorts, of film, music, and fashion, come together. Creative works are always born of dynamics, which he was quick to understand and adapt. He understood that art, creativity, is like traces in the sand: Do nothing and they just fade away.

¹ Literally "woven loincloth of the homeland," traditional Burkinabé fabric.

We met up several times in Paris when he came for his big shows at the Galeries Lafayette or elsewhere in the capital. I always showed up to support art and culture. We also met up in New York, where I was the permanent representative of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie from 2012 to 2014.

Burkinabés are proud folks and harsh judges. Once they've adopted you, you become their ambassador. And so it is with *Pathe'0*. He's respected in Burkina by people from all walks of life, which is rare and no mean feat. He's a role model. But *Pathe'0* no longer belongs to us Burkinabés, he belongs to humanity, above all to Africa. He works for Africa. He's an undeniable icon of African and international fashion. This ageless man who never fails to impress and has nothing but friends all over, has a message for us Burkinabés: Be smart enough to look up and see the wood for the trees, see the bigger picture. *Pathe'0* himself, when leaving Burkina Faso, set his sights on the horizon.





D'ABIDJAN









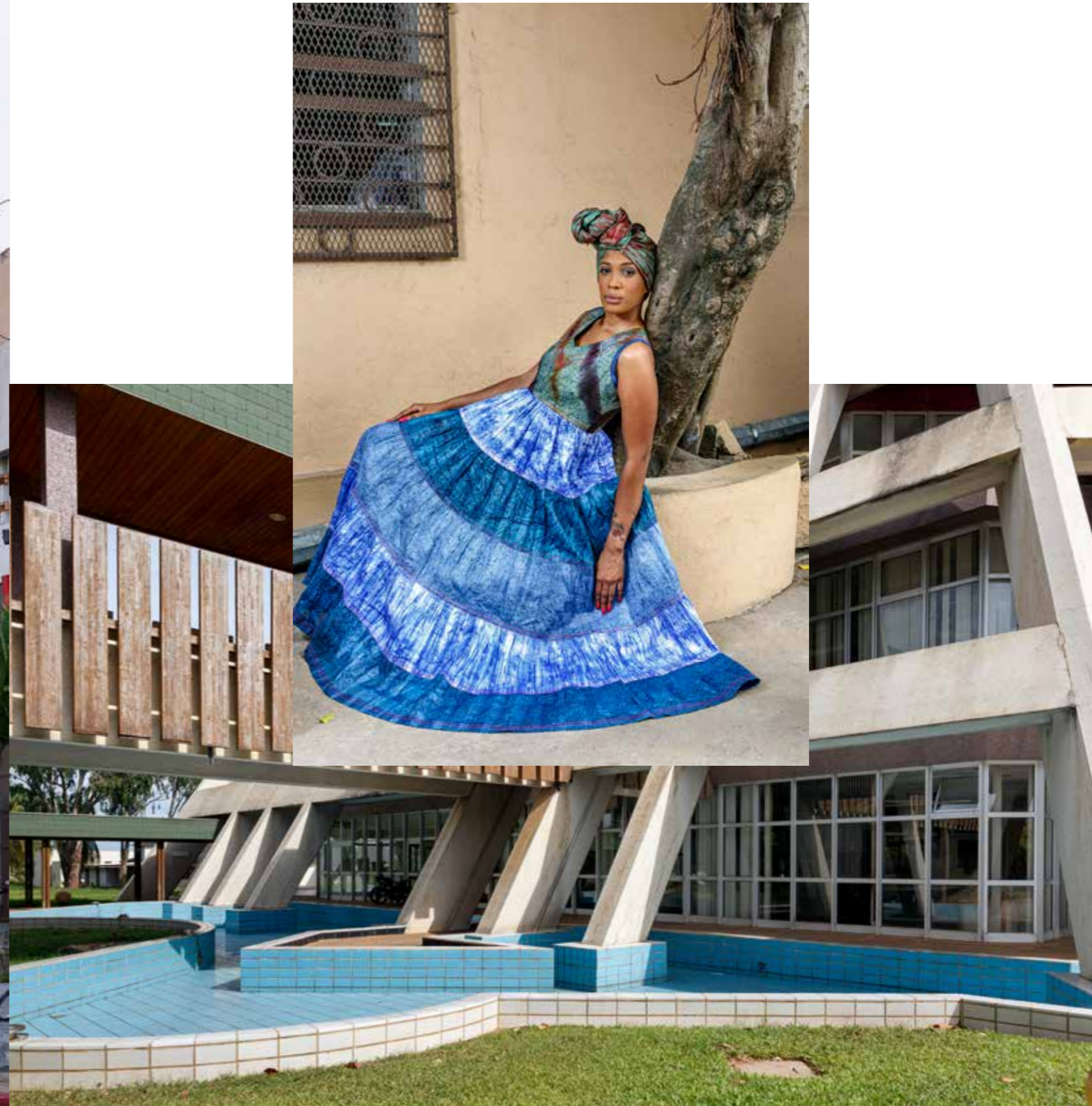


Orange Money #144# Orange Money

SITUES













*Pathé'*⁰ in conversation



Young seasonal harvesters sitting on the back of a tractor trailer at the Denizet banana plantation. Côte d'Ivoire, 1955.

A small village in Burkina Faso in the 1960s doesn't seem the most likely starting point for a great career in fashion. Who was this young fellow who left behind the world he knew to devote his life to fashion in Africa?

As you can tell from my last name, Ouédraogo, I'm of the Mossi people,¹ the majority ethnic group in Burkina Faso,² though my first name, Pathé, is of Fulani origin. I was born in the early 1950s in Guibaré, a small village ninety kilometers northeast of Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. Many rural areas didn't keep civil records yet, so I'm one of those who were born "around" a certain year. My parents were farmers. My mother, Soré Koutunga, had a beautiful voice. She used to sing at ceremonies. My father, Nidawa Ouédraogo, lived his whole life in Guibaré. An old man who adhered to traditional rules like not eating in public, in front of strangers, for example: he only ate with his family, at home. He taught us to speak, though not to answer if you don't know: if you can't answer the question, you keep quiet; if you haven't been

¹ The Mossi, who were exceptional farmers and among the most powerful African kingdoms in the history of the region, now make up a little over half the population of Burkina Faso. Their language is Mooré.

² Burkina Faso gained independence from France on 5 August 1960. Its landlocked territory borders Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Mali, Togo, and Benin. Burkina Faso was known as Upper Volta until 1984,

when the name was changed by President Thomas Sankara and his socialist revolution. The name "Burkina Faso" is a blend of Mooré and Bambara words to mean "the land of upright men."



Harvesting rice in a field owned by the CIDT [Ivorian Textile Development Company]. Korhogo, Côte d'Ivoire, 1960.



Bus parked at Bobo-Dioulasso station. Burkina Faso, 1958.

³ During the first fifteen years of its independence (1960-1975), Côte d'Ivoire was the primary destination for immigrants from other West African countries. The influx continued during the

country's ongoing economic growth (1975-1988), then declined in the wake of the 1980s economic crisis and subsequent rise of Ivorian nationalism.

spoken to and you answer all the same, you're a liar or a hypocrite.

He enrolled me in an agricultural training center at a very early age. Despite this future all lined up for me, I wanted to do what other young people in those days did, the older siblings who'd gone abroad to work. They came back from Côte d'Ivoire or Ghana with bicycles, *tergal* trousers, radios, and flashlights. I remember the excitement every time they returned to the village: we'd try to ride the bikes, listen to the radio and dance to the music coming out of the phonographs - it was magic. This were the stuff of our dreams - and inaccessible to those who stayed in the village. So, naturally, that made us want to leave. It became an obsession, we couldn't think about anything else.

In 1969, when I was a young teenager, my brother and I left one day at dawn without really knowing where we were headed. To "find ourselves," as people used to say. With hardly any money in our pockets, we set out on the road to Ouagadougou, on foot and on a borrowed bike. Our ultimate destination was Abidjan, the city of our dreams. It's a scenario quite like what's happening nowadays, with all these young West Africans leaving their families to try their luck in Europe, despite all the difficulties and dangers. How happy they are when they can finally send a picture of themselves in front of the Eiffel Tower to their family and friends! In those days, Abidjan was our Paris.

My father often used proverbs to pass on to us the wisdom of the elders. That was part of our upbringing. "If you travel, if you go to another country," he once said to us, "someone must take you in and love you as their own child. Otherwise you'll end up forgetting who you are." These words have stayed with me to this day.

You were so young and penniless, how did that long journey work out?

We picked up jobs along the way to earn enough for the next leg of our journey. The budget we started out with got us to Ferkessédougou, the first city in Burkina Faso after you cross the border. There was considerable demand for cheap labor in farming and industry in Côte d'Ivoire.³ Labor Office representatives would board trains from Burkina Faso to recruit workers for cocoa and coffee plantations. They approached my brother and me too. We were taken to Bouaké, a city in



Burkinabé child immigrants to Côte d'Ivoire. Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, 1958.



Lunch break at a canteen on the Denizet banana plantation. Côte d'Ivoire, 1955.

⁴ 1 euro is currently valued at about 656 CFA francs. Since 2013, the minimum monthly wage in Côte d'Ivoire has been about 60,000 CFA francs or €91.50.

the central part of the country, where we were housed in a hostel. Every day, the foremen of the coffee and cocoa plantations would come to hire Burkinabé newcomers. They didn't pick my brother and me right away because we were frailer than the others. But one morning, when there weren't very many of us to choose from, a farmer took us all the same. We ended up in a makeshift camp for farmhands in Sinfra, a forested area in the western-central part of Côte d'Ivoire. They paid us 36,000 CFA francs⁴ for the year. Can you imagine? The essential purpose of our trip was to earn money. How long would it have taken to buy the bike for 15,000 CFA francs or the *tergal* trousers for 3,500 CFA francs? Years!

"A rolling stone gathers no moss," the foreman said when we decided to leave. We took a bush taxi, a Peugeot 404, to Bouaflé, fifty kilometers north, where a lady then gave us a lift in her car. We grew yams for her on mounds and did all sorts of odd jobs, including masonry. She was like a mother to us. With the money she gave us, we were able to pay the fare to Divo down south. I was finally getting closer to Abidjan! We were lucky enough to meet a man who, considering our young age, offered us work in the rice fields, which is less grueling than on the coffee and cocoa plantations. The pay was good but my dream was to get to Abidjan. So we left after receiving our first wages, despite our boss'

Burkinabé women getting their picture taken for identification purposes before immigrating to Côte d'Ivoire. Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, 1958.



pleas to stay. One day in 1969, several weeks after leaving our country, we finally made it to Abidjan. My brother went to Dabou to work on the rubber plantations. And I, without really knowing what I wanted to do, settled in the Treichville neighborhood, which I would never leave.

In the 1950s, Treichville, a historic neighborhood and former industrial area of Abidjan, saw the arrival of the first fashion designers from all over West Africa, and with them various associated trades. What made you choose a career in this field?

I had no choice. I didn't know anyone in Abidjan and had no relatives there. For starters, I had to find room and board. A tailor took me on as an apprentice, fed me and let me sleep in the workshop. That was a start. At first it was just a way to make a living. I came to love the work only little by little. Nowadays, Africans hold this skill in higher regard. These days the children of managers and government ministers are learning how to make clothes too. Which was inconceivable fifteen or twenty years ago. No, this line of work was for us. Raised in a village, alone in Abidjan with no social network and no diploma, I could hardly aspire to become an office clerk. And when you're from a village and you see all those beautiful clothes on hangers in a tailor's shop, it's a dream job!

Luckily for me, Gaoussou Bakayoko, a master tailor specialized in menswear in Treichville, agreed to take me on as an apprentice. There were nine apprentices. At the outset, they have you sew on buttons and hems and iron the clothes. As an apprentice, you don't get paid. We slept on the worktables in the workshop. Early in the morning, we'd straighten up the place and wait for the boss to arrive. I spent all my waking hours working. That was not an easy time. There wasn't much to eat, just one little dish for a whole crew. We had so little money that, one time, when I was sent off to buy coal, I asked the coalman to put in a little less, and I kept the leftover pennies. The boss noticed, but he understood our hardship, so he didn't fire me, even though I'd tried to cheat him. One day he looked closely at the pockets on a pair of pants I'd sewn, and asked, "Who did this?" We were all scared, and me most of all. Turned out he meant to congratulate me because he found the work so well done. He told me, "You're going to stay here a long time." Coming from him, that was a nice compliment. Since he was happy with my work, he always treated me with a certain kindness. Even the day I singed three pairs of pants with my charcoal iron! He forgave me and continued to encourage me.



Fashion show at the Hôtel Ivoire. Abidjan, 27 April 1966.



Le Plateau business district in downtown Abidjan, 1975.



Birthday party of Beatrice Brou, President Félix Houphouët-Boigny's sister-in-law, at the presidential palace on the Corniche de Cocody. Abidjan, 1962.



"The Pyramid" under construction. Designed by Italian architect Rinaldo Olivieri and built from 1968 to 1973, this imposing edifice in the Plateau business district came to symbolize the 1980s economic boom in Côte d'Ivoire. Abidjan, 1972.

You discover this trade by working long and hard at it. After five years' apprenticeship, I'd acquired a good command of men's tailoring. Then I joined the workshop of Cheick N'Diaye, a Senegalese master dressmaker, likewise in Treichville, to learn the technique of women's tailoring. That's where I discovered how creative this job can be. At one point, Cheick N'Diaye traveled to Senegal and I was the one who stood in for him. Business was so good that we had a whole year's worth of turnover during those three months. When the boss got back, he was very happy and invited me out for dinner. A boss going out to eat with his apprentice was something very unusual. It showed that he appreciated me a lot. After a total of nine years' apprenticeship, I'd acquired enough skills to start my own business as a fashion designer.

When did you return to your village for the first time?

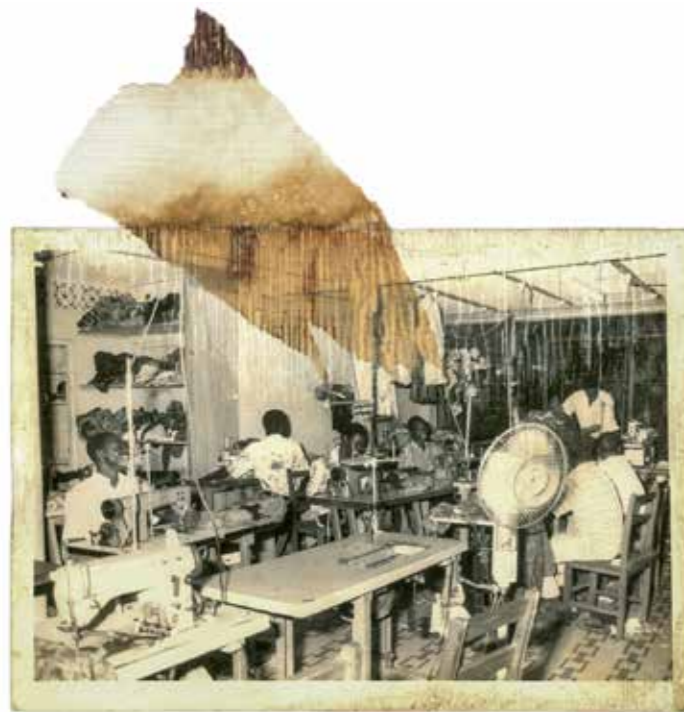
During my years as a tailor's apprentice in Abidjan, I couldn't afford the fare. But when I set up shop for myself, I managed to scrape together enough money to visit my parents in the village. Five of us returned to the village that day. The others brought back mopeds and bikes, including a lady's bicycle with gears - I remember it well. The whole village was there, watching and commenting. One villager came up to me and asked, "And you, how many

"Baby Chiffon" fashion show at the Hôtel du Parc, the first air-conditioned hotel in French-speaking Africa, chiefly patronized by Europeans at the time. Abidjan, 1962.





Boulevard Botreau Roussel in the Plateau business district, with a view of "The Pyramid" and the 25-storey Caistab Building. Abidjan, 1975.



Workshop in the Treichville neighborhood, which was to remain *Palhé*'s production site until 2021. Abidjan, 1998.

years did you spend in Côte d'Ivoire? Ten years, and what did you bring back?" "I've come back with 4,500 CFA francs," I replied. That was all I could bring back. Young people who leave for Côte d'Ivoire at least come back with a bicycle. They make their families proud. When you come back to the village, where life is hard, they ask you for a kola nut or something to eat. That's the rule. Those who don't do anything to help their family and the village are frowned upon. But if you manage to satisfy these demands, your journey on the whole is judged a success. The pressure is tremendous. And it's particularly hard to meet these expectations if you haven't had a family in the host country to support and house you during your apprenticeship. So it wasn't easy for me to face the village, but my mama said, "Thank God you've come!" My parents welcomed me even though I'd returned with so little. They were two extraordinary and very understanding people. Many years later – though my mother was still alive at the time – a friend of mine came back to the village with me. Now that gentleman happened to be extremely rich. Before leaving, he asked my mother for her blessing. She answered him, "*Bonhi be lioul nore hanpa sibpako*," meaning "There is room for only one grape in a bird's beak." At her age, in other words, nothing bad can come from her mouth. When you're a child, you don't understand all the proverbs. But later in life, when you have a problem, you remember them and you realize you can draw on the wisdom of the elders to cope. My whole life force comes from there, from my family, from my village.

Over the course of your career, you've turned the *Palhé*' brand into a development tool and a symbol of Africa's economic independence. How did you manage to set yourself apart from the competition at the outset?

A brand doesn't come about all by itself, it's something you have to work on. I had to make huge sacrifices to achieve the level of quality that the name *Palhé*' represents today. It was hard going at the start. I set up my first workshop with another Burkinabé tailor in 1978 on Avenue 6 and Rue 17 in Treichville. I knew that part of town well and still find it inspiring. Every scene in Treichville is a painting. The neighborhood has a character all its own. There's fashion everywhere you look, everyone is *sapé* [smartly dressed]⁵ – from the small-time orange vendor in her yellow scarf to the

⁵ The verb "*se saper*," French slang for the art of dressing well, is said to be derived from SAPE, the *Société des ambianceurs et des personnes élégantes* [literally "society of ambiance-makers and elegant people"],

a social and fashion phenomenon originating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Congo-Brazzaville.



Family portrait in Guibaré, *Palhé*'s native village. Foreground: *Palhé*' with son Kadré in his arms. Standing behind him: his wife and father (4th and 5th from right) and his mother (2nd from right) wearing the dress that won the Ciseaux d'Or contest. Burkina Faso, 1987.



Palhé' and his father in 1999.

lady in an elegant colorful dress getting out of a green cab.

With meager resources and no outside support, the shop grew little by little. I started by renting a sewing machine. Many customers in those days bought ready-to-wear imports from France and only came to the tailor's for small jobs or ceremonial dresses, for which we didn't try so much to come up with special designs. Most of the time it was a classic ensemble made up of a top with a wrap skirt. Later on, around 1990, the first catalogues came out and customers could ask tailors to make a specific garment based on the design in a photograph – a practice still widespread today. During my apprenticeship, I'd noticed how similar the customers' requests were. They were based on fashions that France had practically imposed on us. I told myself that, once I got set up on my own, I'd come up with my own ideas to set myself apart from the rest. My mind was brimming with ideas. I envisioned new designs, using fabrics manufactured here, that would bring out the color and beauty of African women. At the time, we didn't have any social networks of the kind that young designers use nowadays to promote themselves. But I wore my own creations, which attracted notice from my first customers. People could see I'd done a good job, and word of mouth did the rest: "Go see the little tailor on Avenue 6!" It took me three years to finish paying off my first sewing machine, which I'd bought on credit. Little by little, demand increased and my clientele diversified. I was able to save enough money to invest in a second and

Palhé' helping to fix a roof. Guibaré, Burkina Faso, 2004.





Roundup of foreigners in the Treichville district of Abidjan, 1958.



Presentation of a faso dan fani outfit during *Pathe'o's* guest appearance on the popular Ivorian TV show *Afrique Étoile*, 2015.

then a third machine. My “adjustment period,” as I call it, took six years.

But there was a permanent sense of insecurity because the police routinely raided Treichville to check whether our papers were in order.⁶ The raids targeted the many Burkinabés and other African immigrants in the neighborhood. During one of these raids, they arrested us, took us to police headquarters, shaved our heads and put us in chains. But I was very fortunate then, too. One of my customers, Monique Basque, who was Secretary-General of the Red Cross in Côte d’Ivoire for years, got word of what had happened from one of my employees when she came to our shop to pick up clothes I’d made for her. She immediately went to the police station to demand our release. It was thanks to her that they let us go.

You’re very attached to your patrons and you forged ties to many of them very early on. What role did the press and the media play in this regard?

When I first started out, television was all the rage and had an immediate impact. People were still fascinated by TV, in a way they’re not anymore. Back then, in the 1980s, most of my friends were journalists on Ivorian television, including Roger Fulgence Kassy, a very popular TV show host, who, unfortunately, died young. They did a lot to help my creations gain some public exposure. I used to dress them for their shows. A whole bunch of us would go out on the town together in Treichville, to the nightclubs. Most of the others lived in the better-off residential neighborhoods on the other side of the city, and they’d come down to Treichville at one or two o’clock in the morning. When we showed up at the entrance to a club, people would say, “Hey, it’s the journalists, let them in!” We got in free. One night in 1980, Franco Luambo, the master of Congolese rumba, played a gig in Abidjan with his TPOK Jazz band. Now *that* was music! We’d go out on the town and go dancing a lot, but I’ve never touched alcohol or cigarettes in my life, which is something the others liked to tease me about. We were into dressing up. People would ask me, “Who made these clothes for you?” That’s how I started building up a clientele.

But one night I said, “That’s it, I’m not going out anymore!” I couldn’t afford it anymore. Whenever we went out to eat, one of us would pick up the tab for the whole group. When it was my turn, I couldn’t even pay for

⁶ In the 1990s, the police began regularly carrying out raids among foreign communities in the Treichville neighborhood, targeting in particular the numerous Burkinabés, Malians, and Guineans in this very

cosmopolitan part of Abidjan. The raids frequently involved ill-treatment and racketeering. The police would round up immigrants and force them to sit on the sidewalk, stripped to the waist, while checking their identity

papers and residence permits. The raids intensified from October 1991 when then-Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara mandated residence permits for ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] nationals, who



Pathe'o wearing one of his first faso dan fani creations. Abidjan, 1987.

François Compaoré and *Pathe'o* as guests of Burkina Faso’s Prime Minister Youssouf Ouédraogo, Ouagadougou, 1993.



were previously allowed to settle and work in Côte d’Ivoire without any bureaucratic hurdles. This new measure was introduced in an attempt to curb the influx of immigrants, as Côte d’Ivoire is one of the countries

with the highest proportion of foreigners on its soil (6 million out of an estimated total population of 23 million).

⁷ Ouédraogo is the most common surname among the Mossi, who make up a little over half of the Burkinabé population. The Ouédraogos were the founders of a chiefly lineage: to this day, their descendants are still

my supplies the next day to do my work. On top of that, the others were in television and didn’t start work till eleven in the morning, so they could sleep late. Whereas I had to be at the shop by six, so I just couldn’t do it anymore!

In the early 1980s, Georges Tai Benson invited me as a guest on one of his shows. He was very famous, and hosted a bunch of different shows. They sat us down like pieces of furniture, my three models dressed in *Pathe'o* and myself, without asking us a single question. And yet after that appearance, my shop was overrun: all the women wanted me to make clothes for them. That’s when I took on my first apprentices: Antoinette, Seydou, who, unfortunately, has since passed away, and Léon Ouédraogo,⁷ who’s been my workshop manager for thirty years now. That episode was followed by my first fashion show, which was held at the Hotel Ivoire⁸ and attended by several Ivorian cabinet members and their wives.

Your definitive breakthrough in Côte d’Ivoire came after you won the Ciseaux d’Or award in 1987.

The Ciseaux d’Or [Golden Scissors] competition was started up by the management of Uniwax, the Ivorian wax print manufacturer. The idea was



Pathé^o workshop manager Léon Ouédraogo with an employee at the Treichville workshop. Abidjan, 1998.

to provide public exposure for talented young designers from every part of the country. My two apprentices, Seydou and Léon, showed their clothes there too, but I got first prize. The award brought in lots of new business. The event was livecast on TV and it was in all the newspapers in Côte d'Ivoire. People liked the fact that the entrants were allowed plenty of creative freedom and used fabrics made in Côte d'Ivoire. The dress I entered was called *Oiseau Rare* ["Rare Bird"]. I added a new effect to the fabric by cutting it in some places and sewing it back together upside down. It was a lot of work! We also cut out the birds and put them back on around the dress, one by one, facing each other. Angèle Zaka, a model I worked with a lot, presented the dress. The idea behind that creation was to expand people's imagination.

I wasn't prepared for all that success, so it came with up and down sides for me. My team was made up of my two apprentices and myself. The problem was that once they'd picked the cloth, the women wanted their finished clothes in a jiffy. We accepted one order after another ... and couldn't keep up with the deadlines. We worked day and night. Many a time I had to hide when a customer came in because the job wasn't finished. One time I ran into our tiny

Lively scene at the Mini Brasserie nightclub in Treichville. Abidjan, 1986.



associated with political power. According to legend, Ouédraogo was the son of Yennenga, a warrior princess of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. An excellent rider, she is said to have fought alongside her father

during great conquests, and was then appointed commander of her own cavalry, before deciding to leave it all behind for reasons that differ according to the various versions of the story. The most famous version is that she

grew weary of the role of war chief that her father had assigned her, as he refused to choose a husband for her or let her marry. When he then locked her up, she fled on horseback and, in the forest, met a solitary young



Never too young to dress well: Ousmane, *Pathé*^o's youngest son, modeling his father's designs. 1998.



The model Kimi Khan during a photo shoot for *Pathé*^o at the Hôtel Ivoire. Abidjan, 1988.

elephant hunter named Rialé, a stranger to her community. Yennenga named the son born of this union Ouédraogo, which means "stallion" in the Mossi language, in reference to the horse that had led her to Rialé.

Princess Yennenga is often represented on horseback, and with an air of defiance as though neither society, nor tradition, nor paternal authority could ever restrain her free spirit.

fitting room, but my foot was still sticking out. When my apprentice told the customer that the boss was not in, she replied, "When he gets back, you tell him to hide his foot well." That's the kind of thing you never forget!

What's more, it was hard to find qualified workers in those days. There are plenty around now because we - I and many other designers - have trained them.

The Ciseaux d'Or also marks the beginning of your strong connection to the Uniwax company.

According to the rules of the Ciseaux d'Or competition, it was my job to dress the contestants for Miss Côte d'Ivoire in Uniwax *pagnes*. Which I did for ten years. So I worked on Uniwax colors and patterns for a long time. I was somewhat privileged because I got to choose my *pagnes* straight from the factory. Some Uniwax designs even bore the name *Pathé*^o. We also worked together on campaigns to promote African fashion. Nowadays I only use wax prints when companies ask for them. Over the past five years, for example, I've designed the uniforms for Air Côte d'Ivoire personnel based on a *pagne* that Uniwax developed for the airline. We've also designed the shirts for personnel at the Autonomous Port of Abidjan and the uniforms for the Confederation of African Football [CAF]. My design for the Christian Dior fashion show in Marrakech in 2020 was another collaboration with Uniwax.

What's so special about the *Pathé*^o style?

As a designer, you have to know how to process fabric in a way that makes it even more beautiful when worn. It's all about striking the right balance between the base fabric and the changes you make to it so that the clothes won't strain the eyes. Looking at my designs over time, you'll notice I've come a long way from what I was doing as an apprentice for my boss. For him it was a camisole and tight skirt for women, whereas I've always designed for comfort. My clothes are never skintight from top to bottom, in which the wearer can't breathe. There's always movement in my designs, which is what makes for my signature look, if you will. At first, this approach was criticized. People said *Pathé*^o isn't close-fitting enough, you can't sense the woman inside.

European women are often lacking in the bosom and flat-bellied. So some volume is added on top or in the bottom, with tight cuts at the waist. African women are different. They have beautiful figures that can be brought out.

8 A luxury hotel in Abidjan.



Senegalese beauty Aicha Faye, who won the 1998 Miss ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] beauty contest, with *Pathé'0*, who designed her dress.

Pathé'0 with model Kimi Khan. Abidjan, 1988.



And you'll hardly find any *Pathé'0* clothes without a little embroidery or a second color. A *Pathé'0* garment is always recognizable. We succeeded in developing a special look that people came to accept and appreciate, though we had to insist on it!

The Spanish fashion designer Paco Rabanne raved about your creativity. How did you first meet?

I met him in 1988, during the Miss Côte d'Ivoire contest. He was president of the jury, of which I was a member. While the votes were being counted that day, I put on a fashion show of my collection. When I went to see Paco at his hotel the next day, he said, "*Pathé'0*, you're sitting on gold, but it's the others who are cashing in on it." I grumbled about the lack of respect for the fashion industry in Africa. He explained to me that when he started out, the situation was the same in France. That in the 1940s, the children of the nobility in Paris didn't make clothes, that was for immigrants. He was an immigrant himself, having left Spain to settle in France. And yet, he added, to this day, besides the arms market, fashion and culture are France's main exports. During his stay, Paco Rabanne gave an interview in the weekly *Ivoire Dimanche*. He said I was one of the great designers doing amazing, sublime, very contemporary things in Abidjan. We met up again in 1993 during my first fashion show in Paris, under the Printemps Haussmann dome, where Paco Rabanne was the guest of honor.

Who invited you to do your first fashion show in Paris in 1993?

In 1992, a company had invited me to present my collection at the Hôtel Ivoire. The show was magnificent and a big success! Afterwards, Air Afrique held a fashion show at the Galeries Lafayette in Paris. Each member country of Air Afrique got to send one designer to this show. Collé Ardo Sow came for Senegal, Chris Seydou for Mali, and, although Niger isn't part of Air Afrique, Alphadi came to represent the country, along with plenty of other African designers. The idea was for me to represent Côte d'Ivoire, but I didn't have enough money to make the trip! All the others had their travel expenses covered by their country. As for me, I was advised to go and see the minister of tourism, but he told me they had no budget for that. I kid you not! You see how it is here! So I told the people at Air Afrique that I wasn't going. They immediately called me: "*Pathé'0*, it's thanks to you and your fashion show that we came up with the idea of holding this event in Paris. So find a way, whatever it takes." And they told me they'd pay for the hotel if I could scrape together the airfare, which I did, and then flew off to France for the first time. Paco Rabanne was the guest of honor and he was to award a trophy to the best designer there.



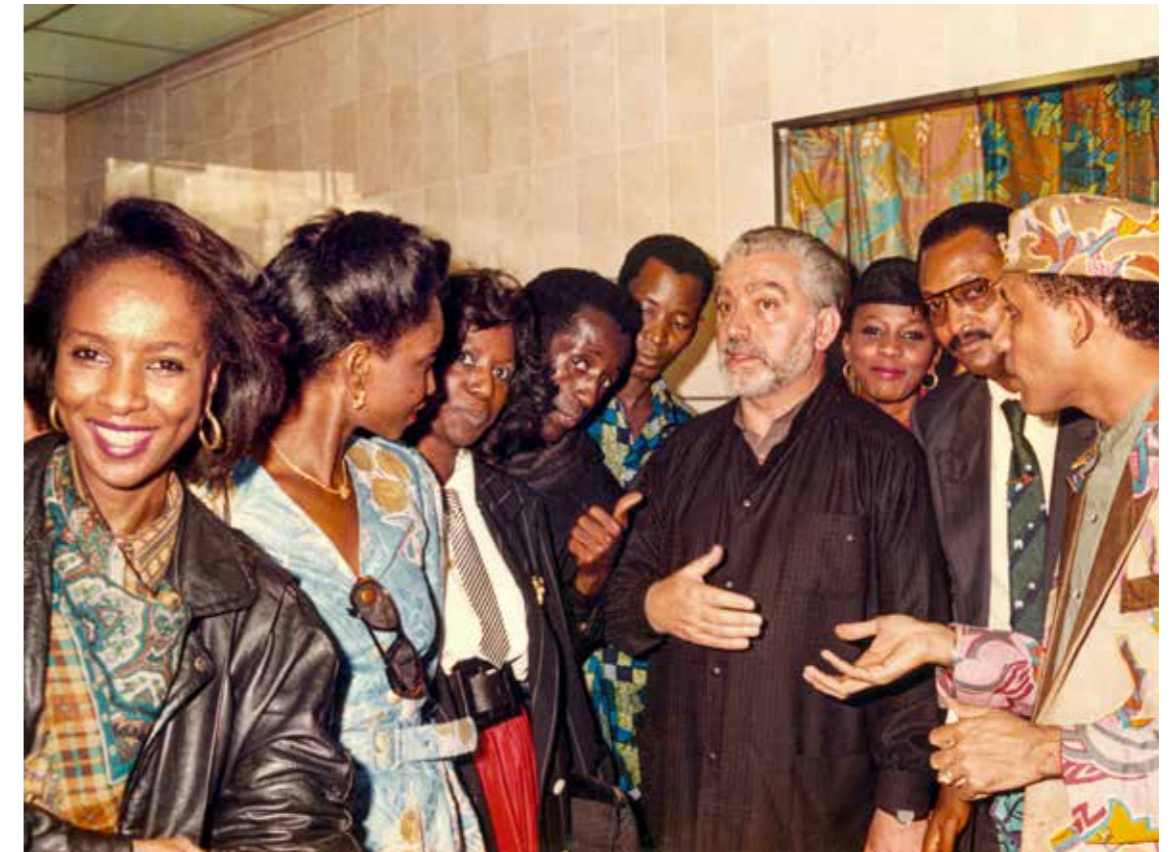
Pathé'0 opens the Dior Cruise 2020 show at the El Badi Palace in Marrakech with his "Tribute to Nelson Mandela by *Pathé'0*" design. Morocco, 2019.

But Alphadi and Chris Seydou, who were the most well-known, had started fighting over the trophy even before the show got started! Paco came up to me and said, "Have you seen your colleagues? What do I do?" "Disqualify Alphadi, Chris Seydou, Collé Ardo Sow, and me," I suggested. My reasoning was that we were the most well-known and that the newcomers should be given a chance. So that's what he did and Aissata Tamboura from Burkina Faso won the trophy.

The growth of fashion in Africa has generated a new demand for fashion models. How did you contribute to this development in West Africa back in the 1980s?

Back when I first set up shop, there were no professional models in Abidjan. Modeling was not a recognized occupation, or rather it was regarded askance, as a disreputable job. It wasn't till the early 1990s that a generation of supermodels first emerged here, and made a big splash. Pépita Kragbé-Coulibaly, Angèle Zaka, Amy Dosso, Yolande Ouattara, Christiane Levy, Kimi Khan, and Nicole Bouabré were among the first wave of models in Côte d'Ivoire and West Africa. They presented my collections at all my first shows, starting in 1986, and we forged lasting ties. We became sort of a family and they knew my wife and children well. It was Angèle Zaka who presented the outfit that

African designers' show at the Printemps Haussmann with *Pathé'0* (5th from left), Paco Rabanne (center), Chris Seydou (4th from left) and Alphadi (far right). Paris, 1993.





Malian designer Chris Seydou with models, including Guinean supermodel Katoucha Niane (left), wearing a *bogolan*-based collection. 1987.

Naomi Campbell wearing *Pathé*¹⁰ for the "Night of African Fashion." Libreville, Gabon, c. 1995.



won me the Ciseaux d'Or award. And the girls accompanied me to my first fashion show in Ouagadougou. I had no money to pay them at the time, but they weren't in it for the money anyway. After the shows, we'd all go out to eat together, that was all I could offer. We were friends who supported and brought out the best in one another. Later on, other West African designers like Chris Seydou and Alphadi who were looking for models approached them too. Abidjan was the fashion capital of the region and if you needed models for a show, Abidjan was the place to look.

And there's a funny story about this. Back in the 1980s, a lady named Yvette Hollande brought along her own models from Paris for her first fashion show in Abidjan. She was of Ivorian origin and married to a diplomat who served as the Canadian ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire for a while. Thanks to her influential network in Abidjan, she managed to get the auditorium of the Hôtel Ivoire for her fashion show. With her girls from France, she looked down on us, the locals, including our beautiful African models. For her second show, however, she was running low on funds, so she wanted to use my models. "The lady has changed her mind," they told me, so I advised them to ask for 50,000 CFA francs each. Yvette Hollande was incensed when the girls named their price and she called me up immediately: "How you doing, *Pathé*¹⁰? Do your girls take themselves for Parisians? They've got some nerve!" "But that's what we pay them too!" I replied. "But I'll see if I can talk them down a little." Madame Hollande ended up having to pay 30,000 CFA francs and from then on she respected us. After all that song and dance! We had a good laugh at that!

I'm still in touch with those women now. Many of them continued their careers abroad, a few stayed, some have returned. The models I work with today often call me "Papa." The fashion world isn't easy so I try to help them out as much as I can. Our models are part of the *Pathé*¹⁰ family.

In the 1990s, you designed some embroidered leather vests that Naomi Campbell adored. Tell us about that encounter.

I was invited to present my collection at African Fashion Night in Libreville, Gabon. Naomi Campbell was the patron of the event and she had to present outfits by all the designers. For the fitting, all the designers were instructed to wait their turn in front of her hotel room. But I refused to. I'm not going to get in line for a model to wear my clothes. She may be the celebrity, but I'm the one who made the clothes. So I stayed in my room. Naomi had a list of all the designers whose clothes she was to wear, and when she got to my name - I was last on the list - she noticed she hadn't



*Pathé*¹⁰ first international show, under the Printemps Haussmann cupola, with Chris Seydou (far right), various friends and Air Afrique representatives. Paris, 1993.

Models (from left to right) Pépita Kragbé-Coulibaly, Christiane Levry, Yolande Ouattara, Angèle Zaka, and Amy Dosso in Ouagadougou with *Pathé*¹⁰ for the fashion show at the International Arts & Crafts Fair [SIAO]. These five Ivorian women were among the first wave of professional models in West Africa. Burkina Faso, 1988.



been fitted for my ensemble. Her assistants rushed over to get me, but I told them I wasn't coming; if Naomi Campbell didn't show my clothes, that wasn't a problem for me, it wouldn't prevent me from taking part. And to my surprise, Naomi appeared at my door a short time after that. She'd asked to be escorted to my room for a fitting. She took off all her clothes - something our models would never do - and put on my dress. She looked amazing! Now it just so happens that I was wearing one of my embroidered leather vests that day. Naomi exclaimed how gorgeous it was and asked me where I'd bought it. I told her it was one of my creations and that I'd brought several with me. I had seven left - and she bought them all up! Over the next few days, we sort of became friends. It was funny because I didn't understand English, but every time she came down from her room she'd knock at my door and call out to me, "I am going down now!" And I'd answer, "OK, j'arrive!"

You use a mix of several varieties of traditional African fabrics in your clothes, but you've stopped working with wax prints. How come?

Because wax is always wax. Whatever style you're going for, it'll always remain a wax print. This technique of coating fabric with wax is



Air Afrique (1961–2002) was a pan-African airline created by eleven (mostly West) African countries. Côte d'Ivoire, 1966.

originally a Javanese craft, which the Dutch industrialized and imported into Africa. As I see it, the wax print *pagne* is a fabric from Indonesia that's caught on in Africa and consequently become an African fabric. But wax prints emerge from the factory already designed and beautiful, which doesn't really leave me any scope for creativity. The color's already there and dominant, whatever I do. If I was to make my mark, I'd have to work with other fabrics from the region, which gave me greater freedom to develop my own ideas. You don't have to use wax prints. I'm the biggest shirt maker in Côte d'Ivoire and yet I gave up using wax prints a long time ago, opting instead for dyeing techniques on cotton voile and patterned woven *pagnes*. I use a wide range of different West African fabrics. There's Korhogo cloth and the Baoulé *pagne* in Côte d'Ivoire, *faso dan fani* in Burkina Faso, and I've also worked with *bogolan*, a traditional fabric from Mali. I now prioritize very fine fabrics that are comfortable for everyday wear. For the cotton voile colors, I work with women who master the art of dyeing, a *savoir-faire* that comes from Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Senegal.

But there's a lot of work left to do to make the most of our regional textiles. Except for *faso dan fani*, the weaving process hasn't evolved much, so the fabrics are confined to the

Polhé'0 in one of his *faso dan fani* shirts meeting Burkina Faso's President Thomas Sankara, who tasked him with designing a contemporary *faso dan fani* collection to promote this symbol of national identity among young Burkinabés. Ouagadougou, 10 August 1987.



Kimi Khan (née Nelly Keita) during a fitting for *Polhé'0*. Of Ivorian-Guinean and Beninese-Togolese origin, she walked the catwalk in the 1980s and 1990s for the biggest names in international fashion and launched her singing career under the name "Kiane." Abidjan, 1988.

manufacture of traditional clothing that reproduces the same patterns all the time. The fabrics have remained thick and stiff, and sometimes fade due to the lack of dye fixatives. And yet we could look for ways to fix the colors more permanently and make the fabrics more fluid. We have even found colors to vary the gradations of indigo, which goes to show what a wide range of possibilities there are. And it's not too late to develop this sector. There are still women around who practice the art of dyeing and plenty of skilled traditional weavers. The question is how to industrialize these textiles to make them more accessible and portable. Some attempts have been made to industrialize *kente* in Ghana, but that didn't work out because not enough people buy *kente* in our countries. It's important to understand that *kente* colors represent royalty, customs, tradition. It wasn't meant to inundate global markets. On the contrary, *kente* is the symbol of royal families, it was created for the nobility and for special celebrations. For a solid base, these fabrics first need to be worn daily here in our region before setting our sights on foreign markets.

For Thomas Sankara, the president of Burkina Faso and victim of a violent coup in 1987, wearing *faso dan fani* was an economic, cultural, and political act. How does your work tie into that?

Faso dan fani means the "woven cloth of the homeland" in Bamana, one of the languages spoken in Burkina. Thomas Sankara had read an article about my work in the Burkinabé daily *l'Observateur*, which the photojournalist Ben Idriss Zoungrana had written after the Ciseaux d'Or competition. Sankara asked to meet with me, so I went to him, to the president's office, shortly before his death. I was wearing one of my *faso dan fani* outfits that day. He told me it was precisely this style that could convince his people, and especially the youth, of the fabric's modernity. He explained that *faso dan fani* could be our salvation, our garment industry, our future. And he suggested I hold a big fashion show in Ouagadougou to show it in its best light.

He was a visionary, ahead of his time, and many people still identify with his legacy today, in Burkina and in the rest of Africa. Making clothing a symbol of revolt was also part of his program to promote agricultural development. Sankara's objective in promoting *faso dan fani* was to give work to cotton farmers, keep the cotton gins running, and provide an income for women weavers. This is how the first women's cooperatives got started. It's important to understand that the development of the fashion industry in Africa is only just beginning. We've come a long way since the days of Sankara. Nowadays you can find domestically produced clothes, whereas in 1980s Burkina, if you wanted



Opening of the very first *Pathé'0* (left) store in the upscale Cocody district. Abidjan, 1999.

a range of clothes to choose from, you had to look abroad, in Italy or France. When Sankara took over in 1983, he refused to sell cotton at the low prices that international buyers were offering. He tried to negotiate, but in vain. This sort of resistance did not please France and the CFTD,⁹ which bought all its cotton from Francophone Africa. So Sankara declared that Burkina Faso wouldn't sell any cotton at all. A whole year's cotton harvest was piled up on several floors beside the Ouagadougou train station. I saw it with my own eyes. The rain came and spoiled it all. Then again, I don't think it was a good idea of Sankara's to force civil servants to wear *faso dan fani*.¹⁰ People don't like being forced to do anything. Besides, the weaving technology wasn't sufficiently developed yet, the fabric was scratchy and hard, and we'd yet to come up with a method to permanently fix the colors, which would then wash out. So, just to provoke him, civil servants would purposely wear the same faded clothes day in, day out. Today, on the other hand, Burkinabés wear *faso dan fani* with pride, everyone from students and TV presenters to President Roch Kaboré and his government. They do so of their own accord because they've come to realize it's a beautiful example of a national *savoir-faire* that gives many of their compatriots a living to provide for their families. And also because *faso dan fani* production has improved a lot since Sankara. It has made incredible progress compared to other textiles woven in West Africa, which haven't developed much.

Pathé'0 meets Blaise Compaoré, Burkina Faso's president from 1987 to 2014. Ouagadougou, 2000.



Yolande Ouattara presenting a *Pathé'0* outfit at a gala dinner for cabinet members and celebrities at the Hôtel Silmandé. Ouagadougou, 26 August 1988.

You've been influential in orienting *faso dan fani* towards the fashion market. How did you manage to convince Burkinabés that this is an elegant fabric?

When I received the *faso dan fani* fabric for the fashion show Sankara had proposed, I recognized its great potential, but also the need to improve it for high-quality fashion. The *faso dan fani* fiber is very well suited to our climate, but it had to be made softer and finer. I worked a lot on that later on with the weavers of the UAP Godé women's cooperative in Ouagadougou. All the *faso dan fani* I've developed bears a little *Pathé'0* signature motif.

We've also created our own cotton voile patterns with the dyers Ms. Halima and Ms. Sylla and their teams of women in Abidjan. The problem was that the patterns were very large and often placed in the middle of the cloth. Which is fine if you're making a large garment like a *boubou*, but complicated when it comes to turning out contemporary clothing because the pattern gets cut off. So we developed our own, smaller patterns, with which the fabric can be used to make anything: dresses, shirts, pants. You have to constantly anticipate and innovate in this profession. To find a *pagne*, we don't just look for one at the market.

Our designs have names like *Le Tableau* ["Painting"], *La Salade* ["Salad"], *Le Nuage* ["Cloud"], *Le Moucheté* ["Flecked"], *Le Soleil* ["Sun"]. I give the dyers a batch of cotton voile cut into four-meter lengths and say, for instance, "I want a 'Salad' in beige with brown trimmings" or "I want a 'Cloud,' but very colorful." They're highly skilled and often experiment with new color combinations themselves, which they then propose to me. The main thing is that the patterns are adapted to our needs and give me latitude in the choice of cuts.

With *faso dan fani* and dyed cotton voile, we've created more than two hundred patterns all told.

Why is it important to you for Africans to wear clothes made in Africa?

Clothes are a way to affirm our identity, to be proud of who we are. After all, we're better off wearing cotton, which is adapted to the heat, in beautiful colors that are becoming to us than sweating away in dark suits, right? Why go to Paris, London, Milan to buy clothes, always assuming that what's made abroad is superior and of better quality, when there are so many designers and so much fine artisanship in our countries?



A score of women at the Unité Artisanale de Production [UAP] in Godé are involved in the production of *faso dan fani* fabrics. *Pathé'0* has been working with this weavers' cooperative for thirty years. 2019.

⁹ The Compagnie Française pour le Développement des Fibres Textiles, created by France in 1949, has a virtual monopoly on the development and control of the cotton industry throughout French-speaking sub-Saharan

Africa. The name was changed to Dagrís in 2001, then to Geocoton.

¹⁰ When he came to power in 1983, President Thomas Sankara championed economic independence for Burkina Faso. Among other things, he promoted the country's textile industry with a view to boosting consumption



Ivorian model Angèle Zaka in a gold-and-indigo-striped *faso dan fani* outfit by *Palhé'0* talking to Banque Internationale du Burkina [BIB] President Gaspard Ouédraogo (right) backstage at the International Arts & Crafts Fair [SIAO] fashion show. Ouagadougou, 1988.



Designer Flora Yaméogo wearing a *faso dan fani* outfit by *Palhé'0* at the Treichville workshop. Abidjan, 2021.

of local products: woven fabrics were subsequently intended not for export, but chiefly for domestic use. Furthermore, he issued a decree requiring civil servants to wear *faso dan fani* to work. This measure guaranteed a large

domestic market for the newly created cooperatives and home weavers.

It makes no sense to assume that everything made elsewhere is better and to dream of emigrating abroad. It's good to go to other parts of the world to learn stuff, to train there and draw inspiration from the best that the host country has to offer, but you have to do it without denying your own culture.

If we could just be ourselves, accept who we are, the color of our skin, our culture, our origins, that would make such a difference: we could move forwards and stop thinking that we're something we're not. I can't understand why people who rise to a certain level in society cut themselves off from their roots, denying their origins and acting like they don't identify with Africans anymore. This goes for many areas of life, but it's most conspicuous in our apparel.

Some of your clothes have special names: what's the story behind your *Guibaré* and *Coupeur de Route* dresses?

The *Guibaré* is our flagship dress. It's splendid and very colorful. It was named after my most marvelous fashion show experience. The Burkinabé designers of Ouagadougou wanted to pay their respects to me. I replied that I wasn't a nabob. "But Papa, you've done so much for us," they insisted. So I said, "In my village, Guibaré, they don't know what a designer does. So if you please, we'll go to my village and put on a fashion show there." And off we went. Each model and designer brought their own mat and we slept outside because there was nowhere for us to stay inside. We held the show on the football field and the whole village turned out. It was amazing. I remember the comments from our mamas, who'd never seen anything like it and had no idea about fashion design. The clothes were mostly by other designers, some of whom had made mini-skirts. When the mamas saw that, they said, "Wow! Do they actually find husbands? Even the way they walk - we'll have to start strutting around like that too!" I laughed a lot. It was terrific, a really marvelous experience. The only thing I showed there was this dress. I'd have liked to do that again every year but then the trouble with the jihadis started, it got to be too dangerous.

As for our *Coupeur de Route* dress, it's called that because it has 120 pockets: so how's a bandit going to find your money in all those pockets? It could be in every pocket or in none! When I design a garment like that, I think of an object that displays diversity,



Cotton farmer Yiré Koné in her cotton field wearing *Palhé'0's* 120-pocket *Coupeur de Route* [Bandit] dress. Mankono region, Côte d'Ivoire, 2020.

all the possibilities. With its 120 pockets, this dress goes to show it's impossible to overdo it: *faso dan fani* is never too much. It's not a colorful fabric that puts a strain on the eyes. On the contrary, it's quite subdued.

You deplore the fact that so little home-grown cotton is actually processed in the region.

African politicians don't have a long-term vision. How else are we to explain that the bulk of the cotton picked in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, and elsewhere gets carted right off to the nearest port for exportation? The result is that it's impossible to find one-hundred-percent cotton fabric made entirely in Africa. I have to go to China, India, Switzerland, or Austria for the prime-quality material I need. That's where you find the good fabrics, even though the world's best cotton is grown in Africa. Meanwhile, our markets are inundated with synthetics, although cotton is the right fabric for the heat we have here.

If we had factories in Africa to process cotton into textiles, that would create so many jobs. As matters stand, the cotton gets sent off far away, only to be resold to us for a very high price. There used to be cotton processing factories and textile mills in Côte d'Ivoire. But they ran into difficulties when Chinese textiles hit the market in the early 1990s.

Presentation of *Palhé'0's* signature *Guibaré* dress in his eponymous native village. Guibaré, Burkina Faso, 2015.





Letter from Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, thanking *Palthe*^o for his generosity and paying tribute to his "fashion genius, which so elegantly contributes to the standing of African culture in the world." 1999.

Another problem is that the Chinese are starting to relocate their garment factories to Africa to access cheaper labor. This is what's happening in Ethiopia. Africans can hardly benefit from this approach to developing the textile industry. Young African tailors are going to become employees of Chinese industry, and will be very poorly paid. In any case, this model is designed not to develop Africa, but to supply the global market. We won't make any progress unless we own the industry ourselves. We also need to learn to produce more to meet our needs. We know how to work, but we're still at the stage of small-scale production.

So we need to implement a real policy to encourage the fashion and textile industry, including professional training and production structures.

How do you explain the lack of political decision making that you've observed?

Fashion has long been a despised profession in Africa. Those who don't get very far in their schooling, don't have rich parents or don't know what else to do become tailors' apprentices.

Today's fashion and garment sector is dynamic and promising, but it doesn't figure in national statistics or development programs. It is all but overlooked by public policymakers, who fail to see its economic potential. But they're wrong because this sector creates jobs. Everybody wears clothes, whether or not they're made in Africa. So imagine if all the

Palthe^o (2nd from right) and model Angèle Zaka (3rd from right) serving on the jury of the Miss Côte d'Ivoire beauty pageant in 1989.



Cotton processing at the Gonfreville textile mill. Built in Bouaké in 1921, it was the first integrated textile mill in West Africa, from carding and spinning to weaving, dyeing and finishing of apparel. The mill had its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. Côte d'Ivoire, 1975.



Cotton harvest. Mankono region, Côte d'Ivoire, 2020.

money spent on clothes, which goes all over the world outside Africa, imagine if it stayed here: it could help young people, farmers, manufacturers... everyone.

The fashion sector should be integrated into development plans, just as farming and mining are. It's all just a matter of political will. Africans prefer to sport a tie that says, "I dress French." I've been fighting to change this mindset since day one.

Dark suits do still seem to be the rule for executives.

It's actually a dress code imposed at the top levels of the state in Côte d'Ivoire: the Council of Ministers are required to wear Western-style suits. Companies issue orders to this effect too. The head of a state-owned company told me he once went to a cocktail party at the embassy in one of my shirts: although the ambassador complimented him on his beautiful shirt, his superiors asked him to dress more formally next time around. Even security guards wear suits, which just goes to show that everyone's in a jacket, despite the heat. People from modest backgrounds, when they see someone in a jacket, still say, "He's from Cocody," the posh part of Abidjan. They even suppose he's just flown in from Paris or Milan. For a long time, our little "go" girls - which means "beautiful girl" in Nouchi, Abidjan street slang - only had eyes for guys in suits or blazers, which has become a sartorial habit, the standard look for "swells." Well then, if you absolutely insist on wearing a suit, at least let it be made in Africa. We make some beautiful, well-cut suits, and at least that creates jobs around here!

But the truth is we don't need suits in Africa. And people are coming to understand that just about all over Africa, including in Côte d'Ivoire. At some point in their lives they realize they're no longer obliged to dress like Europeans.

And yet most African leaders still don suit and tie for official appearances.

They think it's necessary to be respected by white people - and by blacks, too, for that matter. Still, they should be the first to back us African designers. Suffice it to say that the real problem in Africa is all the Africans who prefer to buy non-African products.

One exception is Mali's ex-President Alpha Oumar Konaré, who wore *Palthe*^o to official occasions. The Ivorian ex-President Laurent Gbagbo has been a customer since the 1990s and also wore my shirts to meetings. He often held me up as a role model in his speeches. He felt it was important to buy African and said he hoped *Palthe*^o would become a major African brand. But he was once asked about his shirt on RFI [Radio France Internationale] and he replied, "*Palthe*^o gave it to me because I give him publicity." That made me angry. I'd

rather he'd stressed the importance of wearing clothes made in Côte d'Ivoire. He missed an opportunity to express his support for an Ivorian designer.

The Guinean President Alpha Condé has also been wearing *Palhé'0* for a long time. He even gifted some of my shirts to the Ethiopian president. These are symbolic gestures, but they delight us and encourage us to keep at it, for they show that our efforts are appreciated. The Rwandan President Paul Kagame is a patron too. The Ivorian ex-President Henri Konan Bédié only wears *Palhé'0* shirts when he's in Daoukro, his native village in central Côte d'Ivoire, though he didn't when he was in power; only afterwards did he come round to *Palhé'0* shirts. Sassou N'Guesso, the president of Congo-Brazzaville, wears *Palhé'0* when on his ranch, and Alassane Dramane Ouattara, the current president of Côte d'Ivoire, wears *Palhé'0* on weekends by the sea in Assinie. But when political leaders wear our clothes in secret, that's of no interest to us.

Nelson Mandela was different in this regard.

I met President Nelson Mandela in June 1998 at the African Union Summit in Ouagadougou. It was one of the most important meetings in my life. As soon as I got there, I was informed that he was expecting me. He was wearing one of my shirts and accompanied only by his interpreter. Whereas the other heads of state I've met had a big entourage, so it's impossible to know whether they're really listening to you. Mandela took my left hand in his right hand and gave me a light tap on the head, saying, "There are many things in this little head." I nearly keeled over. Then he took me by the hand as if we were old friends, and we strolled around the garden together, talking.

It was the singer Miriam Makeba who'd put us in touch. This *grande dame* of South African song was already a patron of the designer I'd done my apprenticeship with. During the apartheid era, she lived in exile for many years in Conakry, the capital of Guinea. When I started up my own brand and my workshop in Treichville, she became a loyal customer. One day in 1994 or 1995, Miriam Makeba came to my store to buy five shirts she wanted to give President Mandela. So I gave her two extra shirts to give to this man I admired so much. I had the great pleasure of receiving a handwritten letter of thanks afterwards from Nelson Mandela. That's when I knew he was different from the others. In those days, African politicians wore Western suits and shirts. To wear shirts by an African designer, as Mandela did, was something totally new, revolutionary. Mandela was the first African head of state who was not afraid to appear publicly, in his official capacity, in African attire. And who



Models Danielle and Flore in *Palhé'0*. *Palhé'0* collaborated with Uniwax and Dior on his "Nelson Mandela Tribute" shirt. Abidjan, 2021.



Palhé'0 met Nelson Mandela in June 1998 at the African Union Summit in Ouagadougou. The South African president's subsequent patronage catapulted *Palhé'0* to world renown.

wasn't ashamed of it. That was a very powerful message. It helped his peers to overcome their inhibitions, to feel comfortable wearing colorful shirts. In his letter to me, he wrote, "The Africa of tomorrow belongs to the creators of wealth," which I found intriguing. When I met him, I asked him what he'd meant by that. He replied that for him, wealth creation is anything that enables you to earn a living thanks to your work, your skills. If you give a carpenter a piece of wood, for example, and he works it and then sells it, that creates wealth. This is an encouraging and inspiring line, which corresponds to what we do at our shop, where we take a simple cloth, cut, sew, and process it into a garment that people like to wear.

You have noted some changes in terms of political will. Do you have any examples?

I'd like to cite the case of Burkina Faso, which promotes the use of certain locally made products, especially clothing, perhaps more than elsewhere. When President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré came to power in December 2015, he didn't force anyone to wear *faso dan fani* clothing. He just wore it himself to every occasion, including official ceremonies and meetings with foreign heads of state. Since then, everyone has started wearing it, government officials and the general public alike. So nowadays, you seldom see a cabinet member in a Western suit. I myself have made *faso dan fani* clothes for President Kaboré, and my

Poster of Miriam Makeba, a South African singer and long-time *Palhé'0* advisor.





Palhé'0 with Alphadi, a Nigerien designer and founder of the International Festival of African Fashion [FIMA]. Ouagadougou, 2004.



Japanese designer Kenzo Takada with a friend at the first edition of FIMA, held near Agadez, Niger, in 1998.

workshop has made clothes for all the ambassadors of Burkina Faso, all over the world. For a long time there was this myth that “good things come from elsewhere.” Those who returned from Europe, from Paris, the “*Ben-guistes*,” as we call them, were covered in glory. They were admired, envied, all the girls went for them. But that’s not the way it is anymore. In many domains, Africa’s where it’s at now, not Paris.

This goes to show that when those at the top set an example, when there’s a real political will, we can change lots of things. I’m very happy about this development. From now on, we’ll keep moving forward, because once you discover who you are, it’s hard to go back.

Do your fashion shows, all of which are held in Africa, boost your sales?

Most fashion shows with models are organized by stylists and designers. But there isn’t really any follow-up after the shows. This is actually how I feel about all the fashion shows, and I’ve been to plenty of them on the African continent over the past thirty years. A fashion show is regarded as being just a show, a lively party, a festive atmosphere. But the real objective for us, the designers, is commercial: after all, it’s our livelihood. When you put out a product, you have to be able to sell it. But not a single fashion show I’ve been to in Africa was organized with a view to selling a product. In Europe, by contrast, everything revolves around sales during a fashion show.

What’s missing is the link between buyers and retailers, they need to be brought together. We should invite buyers from partner countries to fashion fairs that run for several days, to put African designers in contact with foreign buyers.

Where do you think Africa stands in the global fashion market?

Alphadi, some other African designers, and I were once invited to Paris for one of our first fashion shows. Some French designers were also taking part. While Givenchy got to present twenty-five pieces, we only got to show ten, on the grounds that we were unknowns. I refused to take part. So the organizers changed the rules, and we agreed on fifteen outfits each, which was a small victory! Things have changed since then, African fashion is making a breakthrough in the European market, and Parisians can’t come up to us anymore and say, “We’re the great *couturiers*, we’re going to show you.” That said, I know that Africa has to be the primary focus of our development efforts. Our designs are considered exotic outside of Africa: “Oh, that’s so African! So gorgeous!” But that’s as far as it goes. So that doesn’t create any jobs.

In Morocco, during Dior’s Cruise 2020 Collection show, I got a chance to talk to repre-



Rwandan President Paul Kagamé, a loyal *Palhé'0* patron.



Palhé'0 with Evelyne Rikève Dulkan, first president of the Association of Fashion Designers of Côte d’Ivoire [ACMCI]. Abidjan, 2003.

Spectators at the Miss Côte d’Ivoire contest in 1993, won by Lydie Aka. *Palhé'0* designed the outfits for the finalists of the beauty pageant for ten years running (1988–1998).



sentatives of the French fashion scene. Their conception of fashion is very different from ours. Western *haute couture* seeks to sell a dream, whereas we don’t dream in Africa. There’s no market for *haute couture* in Africa, no myth of exclusivity: fashion is in the real world. This is why Parisian designers have now reached a point where they’re wondering where to go from here, whereas we, paradoxically, have more hope than they do: the hope of reaching the level we aspire to. Our goal is to create fashion that’s adapted to African consumers and climate.

The absurdity of the global fashion industry has given rise to a new source of Western competition for you: how much of a problem are imported second-hand clothes for fashion designers?

All over Abidjan, the markets are inundated with secondhand clothes from Europe, North America, and Asia, known as “*yougou-yougou*” here in Côte d’Ivoire. The bundles arrive every Wednesday at the Belleville market in Treichville, one of the go-to spots for secondhand clothes. You should see the people scrambling! Everyone rummaging around for a nice item at a bargain basement price, some for their families, some to resell. Folks from all walks of life, including even the top brass’ wives, wear *yougou-yougou*. It’s so packed you can’t even find a parking spot there anymore. When



Saleswoman Danielle advising customers in the showroom next door to the *Palhé'0* workshop. Abidjan, 2021.

The "Limited Edition" *Palhé'0* internship for young designers culminates in a fashion show. *Palhé'0* and Youma Fall, in charge of diversity for La Francophonie, came up with the idea to help aspiring young talents get professional training.



you get a load of this spectacle, you have to wonder how a fashion designer can possibly make a living. It's real competition for us. When I first started out, this wasn't a problem. *Yougou-yougou* has only cropped up over the past ten years. People would rather wear little secondhand polo shirts made of synthetic fabric than beautiful cotton shirts made from African cloth. The handicap for us designers is that *yougou-yougou* has become a whole industry in which the vendors pay market fees, but definitely not taxes, whereas we designers are required to pay for trading licenses, municipal charges, and taxes. But let's face it: if it weren't for secondhand, many people couldn't afford to buy any clothes at all.

You have several stores and one of them is right next to your workshop. You often give gifts to your customers there - is that profitable?

To gain recognition for African fashion among Africans themselves, we have to reach out to motivate people so they'll appreciate our work. People of a certain income class tend to have the most reservations about wearing African clothes, they're afraid of not being dressed appropriately. But if they do give it a try, they're won over: "It's so, so beautiful!" The gifts I give some people are part of my approach to forging a bond of trust in the *Palhé'0* brand. I don't really need to do that anymore now. But I often look in at the store and advise a customer in passing, "You should wear this fabric. Wait a sec, try this one." And the gentleman who was about to leave without buying a thing will shell out not for one, but for three or four shirts. And then I might say something like, "Here are our prices, but seeing as this is your first time here, we'll give you a little discount." That's what selling is all about here. And then there are customers who spend a lot every year at our store, so I thank them with a free shirt. It's not that they need it - they may have just spent a million CFA francs - but an extra shirt or dress will be a nice surprise and make them happy. At our other stores, the prices are set. But here at our workshop store, I'm amenable.

You've traveled a great deal on business: is there anything that has particularly impressed you about other cultures?

In 2018, I got an opportunity to go to South Korea. I saw how people there have held on to their traditions and still take pride in them, while innovating spectacularly in the high-tech sector. Even though their history has been marked by devastating events, that hasn't kept them from moving forward. At the fashion show I did in Busan, the Korean models who were showing my clothes didn't speak French or English, but when I explained to them, "You take three steps this way, two steps that way and back," they got it! They're very disciplined.



Backstage at a *Palhé'0* fashion show during the annual meeting of the African Development Bank and the South Korean government. Busan, South Korea, 2018.

In South Korea, it's almost as if a line has been drawn that everyone follows.

In West Africa, on the other hand, we're often nowhere and everywhere at the same time, as though drifting along without knowing what to hold on to. If it were possible to work efficiently, that would be a good thing. But we always have to manage a thousand things at once. People are always coming to visit, which interrupts our work. A relative, an acquaintance, a stranger who's been sent to see you (or who has sent himself!) is liable to drop in at any time, sit down in your workshop and wait there for you to help them solve their problems. If you don't get involved, they criticize you, saying you're not like you used to be, you've changed, you're not African anymore, you've turned white. That's how it is. It takes up all our time, but this is also our culture. In my case, people from Burkina, sometimes older people, will call me from a train station in Abidjan to say, "I don't know my way around here, so come and get me." So you're obliged to go and get them, and then they'll stay till the day they announce that they're leaving.

Another thing I observed on my travels is that it's acceptable in Europe to break free from your family. African culture is not like that. The family is our bedrock. If you divest yourself of family, you end up having to face life on your own. We receive this upbringing in the village: it's what structures us and very often helps us in our daily lives. Work, honesty, respect - we have to respect these

List of mono-brand *Palhé'0* retailers on the African continent. 2018.

<p>• ATELIER DE CREATION Abidjan - Treichville Avenue 19 - Rue 22 Barrée Tél : (225) 21 24 00 96 Fax : (225) 21 24 18 79 Cel : (225) 07 07 53 87 (225) 05 05 04 68</p>		<p>• R.D. CONGO Kinshasa Grand HÔTEL Tél : (00243) 3813799021 Lumubachi Grand KARAVIA HOTEL Tél: 995 522 546</p>
<p>• BOUTIQUE ABIDJAN Cocody les II Plateaux Rue des jardins Tél : (225) 22 41 52 63</p>	<p>• BOUTIQUE BURKINA FASO MERCURE SILIMANDÉ Tél: (226) 50 35 60 05 Fax: (226) 50 30 09 71</p>	<p>• BOUTIQUE MALI Bamako Tél : (223) 75 10 28 60</p> <p>• BAMAKO Chez Coucou Près de Blabla Tél : (223) 66 742 993</p>
<p>• HOTEL PALM CLUB II Plateaux Tél : (225) 22 44 80 00</p>	<p>AEROPORT OUAGA Cél: (226) 78 34 70 70</p>	<p>• GABON N'Galle Boutique Tél : (00241) 06 23 06 34</p>
<p>• SOFITEL HOTEL IVOIRE Cocody Tél : (225) 22 44 19 71</p>	<p>• SOFITEL LYBIA OUAGA 2000 Tél: (226) 50 37 49 02 Fax: (226) 50 37 49 01 Cel: (226) 76 58 49 23</p>	<p>• BOUTIQUE CAMEROUN 923 Rue TOKOTO Face Bonadouma Home Bouna Priso - BP 5405 Tél / Fax: (00237) 42 90 13</p>
<p>• CARREFOUR PLAYIS Marcory Tél : 21 26 53 20</p>	<p>• BOUTIQUE YAMOUSSOUKRO Hôtel Président Tél : (225) 30 64 64 64</p>	<p>• BOUTIQUE ANGOLA Luanda Tél : (00244) 91 51 86 45 (00244) 23 39 32</p>
<p>• Hôtel Radisson Blu Abidjan Cel : (225) 21 22 20 00</p>	<p>AV. KOUAME N'KROUMA Tél: (226) 50 50 15 19 Cel: (226) 76 00 00 09</p>	<p>• GUINEE EQUATORIALE MALABO HÔTEL D'AGOSTO Tél : (00240) 57 24 33</p>
<p>• COSMOS YOPOUGON Tél : (225) 23 48 91 44</p>	<p>Infoline : (225) 21 24 00 96 (225) 07 07 53 87 (225) 05 05 04 68</p>	<p>e-mail : patheo@patheo.fr / site web : www.patheo.fr</p>

values. If I go to my village to see my uncle and find him sitting on the ground, they're not going to offer me a chair so as to put me on top and him beneath me. I sit on the ground, bend my knees, and greet him like that. When I travel, when I have a problem, my thoughts return to my family, to the village I was born in. It's as though that's where my strength is, my salvation, to help me make the right decisions. If we haven't got that anymore, how are we going to cope? Look at young people who haven't known that experience: they grasp at whatever they can, but it's often not the right branches. Money? It isn't solid, and one day or another they fall, with no one to help them back on their feet. I worry about the future of young Africans who are cut off from their roots, their bedrock.

You recently left the Treichville area for a new *Palhé'0* building, built with your own funds, at Riviera Palmeraie in Abidjan. And set up the *Palhé'0* Foundation while you were at it. Is the foundation about supporting the young generation?

The *Palhé'0* Foundation's role is to give young tailors and designers a hand, to advise and guide them. It's not a training center, but an essential part of its activities is to support and encourage these young professionals, to impart better ways of selling their work and skills. We're keeping up the good fight and I can only repeat myself: We grow the best cotton and have a lot of young talent in Africa. The consumers are here, the world is here. So it's only a matter of organizing these young people and continuing to call on the leaders of our states to recognize fashion's potential for the African economy.



Palhé'0 takes a young customer's measurements in the boutique next door to his workshop in Treichville. Abidjan, 2019.



A bicycle race sponsored by *Palhé'0* for the young women in his native village. Guibaré, Burkina Faso, 2003.

Palhé'0 holding a photograph of himself as a young man arriving in Abidjan in 1969, wearing flared pants, which were "in" at the time. His fashionable attire already held promise of a great future career in fashion.



Pathe'0 and his wife at home in the Riviera 2 district. Abidjan, 2019.



FEMME

d'Afrique

EXCLUSIF

MODE

ZAHUI

Mousseline fine

SESSEGNON

Pile et face

PATHE'O

Charme et Soleil

ANGYBELL

La reine des T

ALPHADI

L'Afrique à Paris

NAWAL EL ASSAD

Les couleurs de la joie de vivre

ETIENNE MARCEL

Les couleurs de l'arc-en-ciel

INTERVIEW

PATIENCE DABANY

« GAELLA n'est pas Bonge! »

MAGAZINE

JEU-TEST

Avez-vous une sensibilité dévorante ou capricieuse?


SANTÉ

Toxicomanie

SOCIÉTÉ


La femme, femme ambassadrice de l'AN 2000!

SERVIC
GRATUIT



BIJOUX : CHRISTIANE LAURENT
PHOTOS : J.M. CHAILLOL.

PATHÉ'O
nous offre
de nouvelles
créations,
un heureux mélange
de pagnes tissés et
de luxueux bazins.



PATHÉ'O

a dessiné
avec tout son savoir-faire
de très belles robes chasubles
portées sur des shorts,
des corsaires ou des caleçons.
Et ses charmants décoltés
rendent ces Femmes d'Afrique
encore plus irrésistibles...

Pathé'O

BIJOUX : CHRISTIANE LAURENT
PHOTOS : J.M. CHAILLOL.
RÉALISÉES A LA MADRAGUE DE GRAND-BASSAM

Pathé'O

BIJOUX : CHRISTIANE LAURENT
PHOTOS : J.M. CHAILLOL.

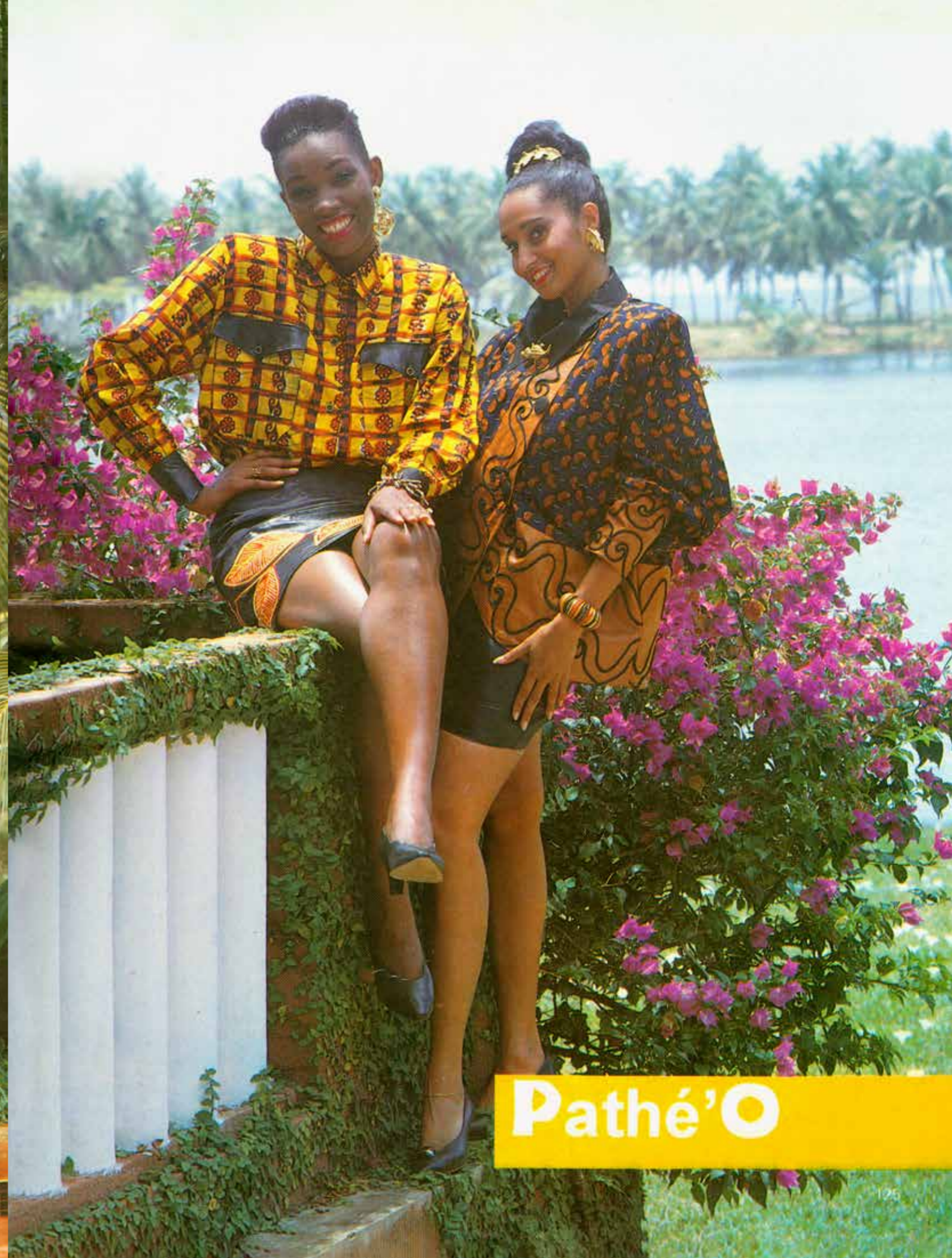


Pathé'O

BIJOUX : CHRISTIANE LAURENT
PHOTOS : J.M. CHAILLOL.
RÉALISÉES À LA MADRAGUE DE GRAND-BASSIN



Pathé'O



Pathé'O



PHOTOS: J.M. CHAILLOL

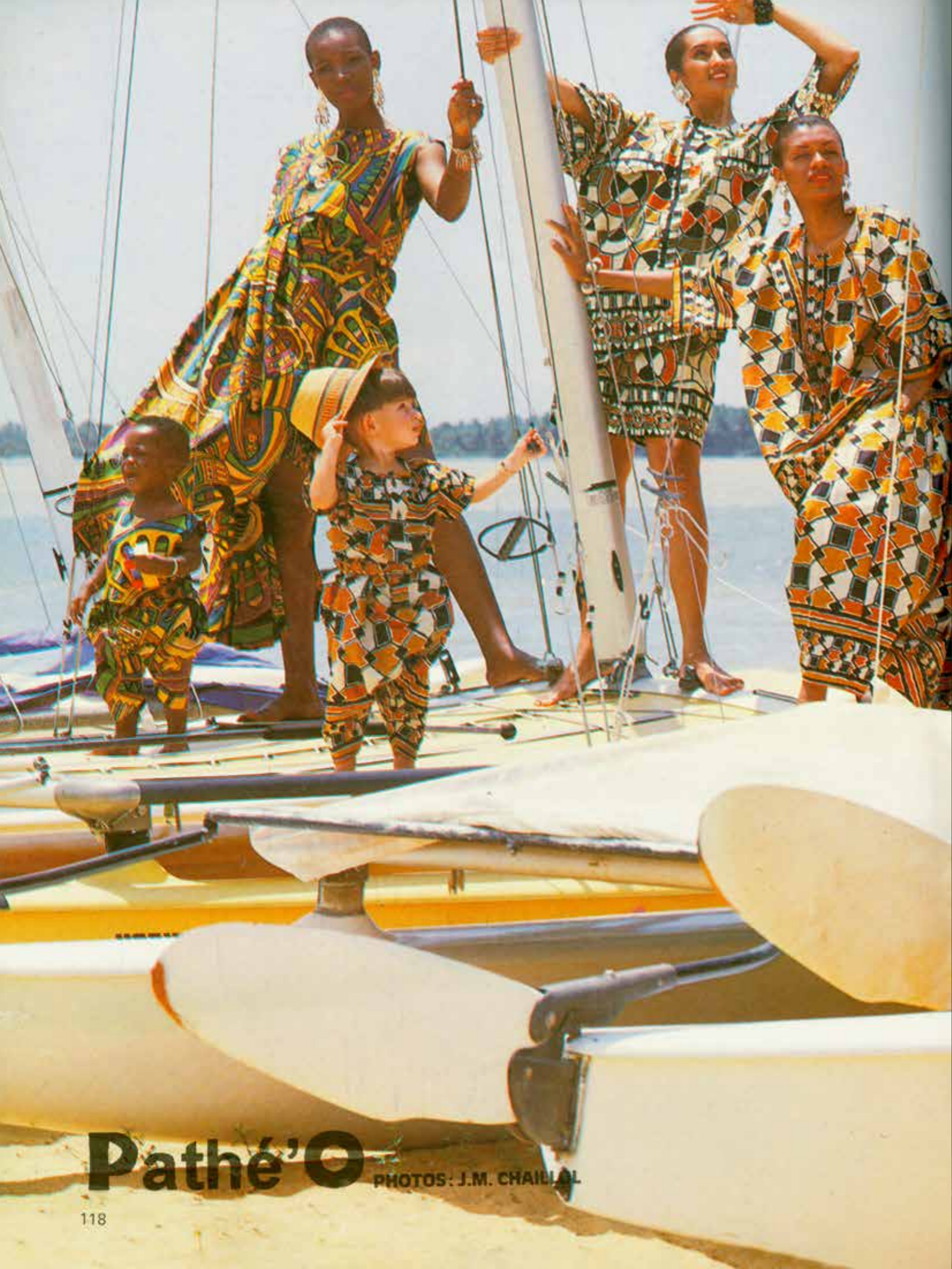


Pathé'O



Pathé'O a été créée en 1997, à la suite de la guerre d'Afrique vers l'Europe et non le contraire. A Libreville, à Jahan, à Rosburg, je viens de Paris, non. Mais l'Europe ne m'intéresse pas dans l'immédiat. Le succès continue depuis grâce à ses collections colorées, avec leur savoir-faire dans les matières locales, tissées à la main. Et toujours dans la forme « ample », que Pathé'O appelle la forme africaine. Le succès de Pathé'O ? Qu'un grand événement de la mode, avec tous les créateurs africains, soit organisé courant 1997 à Abidjan, la plaque tournante de la sous-région, en matière de culture.

PAR DOMINIQUE MOBIOH



Pathé'O PHOTOS: J.M. CHAILAL



Pathé'O

La broderie c'est la mode... Tailleur en satin et jupe longue, portée avec un chemisier court aux manches longues très chic!



Tailleur deux pagnes contrastants, jupe plissée large, veste ceinturée aux manches volantes.

Robe en pagne et coton, très épaulée agrémentée d'une écharpe modulable en col châle.

PATHÉ'O

JEU DU LIN ET DU KITA AU CASINO



A L'ENTRÉE DU CASINO

Jupe longue et bustier fushia en lin. Veste en pagne tissé du Burkina.

ON TENTE SA CHANCE

Pagne tissé du Burkina pour cet ensemble robe-veste de forme classique.



ÉCHANGE D'IMPRESSIONS...
 Le lin, toujours frais et divinement agréable à porter, est mis en valeur dans cette version pantalon large, chemise et veste ample. Une tenue à la fois décontractée et pleine d'allure pour Pépita. Caroline porte une robe bustier et une veste ample en paille lissée du Burkina.



AU BAR, ON SAVOURE UN COCKTAIL
 Elegance d'une robe man-tan pour Sabàlle et d'une robe bustier et veste trois-quarts pour Angèle.



An African fashion designer

If I had to sum up *Pathé*'s in a few words, I'd say he's one of the greatest African fashion designers. I think this high praise perfectly sums up his commitment and talent. Then again, many young fashion designers regard "African designer" as a pigeonhole from which they'd like to break free. They prefer to call themselves "artists," contending that art has no borders or color, but a certain claim to universality. They don't want to be reduced to their origins or even included in a catch-all of fifty-four countries.

These concerns are utterly alien to *Pathé*'s approach to his work. He considers himself a craftsman, someone who works materials with his hands. Alternately introduced as a representative of Burkina Faso or Côte d'Ivoire at international fashion shows, all he wants is for Africans, wherever they're from, to feel

Anne Grosfilley, the author of *Wax & Co. Anthologie des tissus imprimés d'Afrique* (Éditions de la Martinière, 2017) and *WAX 500 tissus* (Éditions de la Martinière, 2019), holds a PhD in anthropology and specializes in

African textiles and fashion. She works as a consultant for businesses and fashion designers, curates exhibitions, and regularly collaborates on international projects.

happy wearing clothes made on their continent. But he didn't start out with that in mind. He began tailoring in order to learn a trade with which to earn a living. So he cut and sewed before he began designing clothes. At several tailor shops he learned how to reproduce clothes brought to him by customers in order to earn his daily bread. He was gratified when customers were satisfied and kept coming back. His work was finely finished, to be sure, but he didn't have his own personal style yet because he was merely adapting pre-existing designs to his customers' measurements. He gradually came to realize that making clothes could be much more for him than merely a way to make ends meet.

In the 1980s, *Pathe*⁰ met Chris Seydou, a designer from Mali who'd just moved to Abidjan and become the darling of the *grandes dames* of Côte d'Ivoire's economic capital. After various stints at major Parisian fashion houses, Seydou had hit upon the idea of combining Western cuts with Malian textiles. He made the bold move of cutting *bogolans*¹ to model them in the spirit of Chanel suits and repurposing the *bazin*² of loose-fitting *boubous* to make fitted dresses. This was a real revolution in fashion, given the clear-cut divide that existed between Western styles and traditional African dress. Each kind of fabric was codified, corresponding to specific types of clothes and occasions for wearing them. Seydou set out to decontextualize fabrics, push the boundaries, and decompartmentalize fashion, in order to bring about an innovative dialogue between forms and fabrics. He deliberately cut up fabrics that were traditionally draped. Tampering with their integrity marked a transition from ritual use to an aesthetic approach that opened up new markets. In so doing, Chris Seydou made a crucial contribution to the breakthrough of *bogolan*, which, in the space of just a few years, rose from the lowly status of a rural

¹ Also known as "mud cloth," *bogolan* is a Malian fabric dyed by traditional methods in various sober shades of brown, black, white, and ochre.

² An African cotton-based damask fabric with a distinctive luster and stiffness.

fabric worn by animist communities to an emblem of the Bamako elite and eventually won over a highly selective clientele in New York and Paris, London and Milan.

Chris Seydou's aura kept growing and inspired the tailors of Abidjan, to whom he became a mentor. In 1987, the Abidjan-based Uniwax company seized upon this renaissance to refresh and revitalize the image of its wax print fabrics. At the time, wax³ was deemed the fabric of choice for the mature, respectable married mother and housewife. It was worn very conventionally as a "three-piece suit" comprising a bodice and two draped *pagnes*. But girls in the city often preferred jeans, and Western-style clothing was a status symbol among the upper class. Côte d'Ivoire's first lady Marie-Thérèse Houphouët-Boigny, however, gradually traded in her American-soap-opera-inspired dresses and hats for Seydou's designs.

Uniwax took advantage of this effervescence to launch the Ciseaux d'Or [Golden Scissors] contest, inviting Ivorian tailors to revisit wax print fabrics with elegance, harmony, and creativity. *Pathe*⁰ won the first edition with a glorified take on the *Oiseau Rare* ["Rare Bird"] *pagne*, which brought him local fame and some measure of financial ease. His *Oiseau Rare* also lent him wings to fly, to create his own clothes instead of adapting those of others. He began positioning himself, turning fashion into a real economic, artistic, even political endeavor. Without getting directly involved in the political scene, he was nonetheless well aware of attempts by the powers-that-be to co-opt fashion for the purpose of shoring up patriotism. General Mobutu's *abacost*⁴ over in Zaire was a case in point. In an effort to support women weavers, Burkina Faso's President Thomas Sankara had decreed that all civil servants must wear *faso dan fani* [literally "cotton cloth woven in the homeland"] two days a

³ Printed cotton fabric, often in flamboyant hues, coated on both sides with a water-repellent wax.

⁴ *Abacost* is short for "à bas le costume," i.e. "down with the suit." This official sartorial policy (1972-1990) prohibited Zairians from wearing the Western-style suit and tie in order to express a symbolic break

with the Congo's colonial past and with the dominance of Western culture. The new *de rigueur* light-weight outfit for men resembled a Mao suit and also came to be called *abacost*.

week. This measure was sometimes misconstrued as an attempt to promote peasant clothing. *Pathé*⁰, for his part, feels that everyone should be free to wear whatever they like: clothing is, first and foremost, a form of personal expression. People should never be forced to wear one garment or another, but offered a variety of clothes in which they can feel comfortable, elegant, and express themselves freely.

In the late 1980s, amid a burgeoning of women's fashion in West Africa, men's fashion remained conservative. The suit and tie was still deemed proper attire for men – albeit with the air conditioning going full blast to alleviate the heat indoors. This made no sense to *Pathé*⁰. It reflected a veritable inferiority complex. Nearly thirty years after independence, it was time to decolonize African minds and fashion. Since cotton is the fiber best suited to the heat and is grown locally, he explored it in every form, from industrial wax print fabrics made in Côte d'Ivoire to handweaving. Without any antagonizing or polemics. All local materials should be valorized, he felt, and should benefit from a consistent commitment to support every textile sector in Africa. The long-sleeved shirt that *Pathé*⁰ wears buttoned up to the neck was to become his signature style. Sober but original, it can be worn with slacks for a dressy style or with jeans for a more casual look. It can also be combined with “village trousers” which differ from the corresponding rural garment – gathered and tightened at the waist with a simple knotted cord – by virtue of the added darts, zip fly, and buttoned waist. While these pants still pay tribute to their origins, his modifications go to show that city dwellers can't be won over by asking them to dress exactly like rustics. That would be perceived as a step back, as regression, as a rejection of social progress. What was needed, on the contrary, was novelty, modernity, and this modernity could be local: it needn't come from elsewhere to be desirable.

Nowadays, in light of the current craze for wax print fabrics in Africa and in the West, it is hard to comprehend how making a man's shirt out of Uniwax could have amounted to a fashion revolution in the 1980s. But *Pathé*⁰ truly transformed the prevailing mindset at a time when wax was basically considered the stuff of women's apparel. Ethnic Akan⁵ men traditionally wore it draped like Roman togas for traditional celebrations, but for the rest it was not a very popular kind of fabric. A man wearing a printed *pagne* shirt was regarded as a pauper, too poor to afford imported *prêt-à-porter* or to purchase plain or striped fabric. Furthermore, European wax prints (especially the Dutch brand Vlisco) were far more popular in West Africa than garments from the local Uniwax factory. So many local designers used Vlisco wax to enhance the prestige of their garments. *Pathé*⁰, on the contrary, made it a point of honor to use only Uniwax in order to elevate the standing of local high-end products.

The *Pathé*⁰ style gradually caught on, and the price of fame can be measured in terms of the number of imitations: local tailors proceeded to copy his designs and sell them for lower prices. But to *Pathé*⁰, this copycat phenomenon was all part of the game, proof positive that his approach was sound and popular. Meanwhile, he set out to design fabrics of his own that would be even more recognizable, but also inimitable. So he turned to traditional crafts like dyeing and weaving by hand. Unlike Chris Seydou, however, he didn't want to use traditional fabrics – out of respect for their sacredness. His idea was not to revisit pre-existing fabrics by decontextualizing them, but to draw on traditional skills in order to create new fabrics and unique motifs. Working with UAP Godé, a Burkinabé cooperative of women weavers, he developed his signature hexagonal grid pattern, a visual theme that yielded a whole panoply of chromatic variations.

⁵ West African population settled mainly in Ghana.

Working with Dieudonné Zoundi, a textile engineer trained in Roubaix, France, he developed new assortments of *ikats*⁶ and worked on increasingly light handcrafted textures. Unlike some designers who use pre-woven fabrics to design garments that will enhance them, *Pathé'0* plans his collection first, then develops his fabrics – which, as a result, perfectly correspond to the desired width. This enables him to anticipate the exact placement of the fringes and the sections of the warp that are to remain unwoven. Instead of keeping textile design and garment making separate, he interweaves them, thereby giving meaning to each stage of the process from start to finish. He does the same with cotton voile dyed by Malian and Ivorian craftswomen to produce blurred and mottled effects. Although each pattern corresponds to a specific technical code, each piece is unique owing to the magical random effects of crumpling the fabric or splashes of dye.

Pathé'0 thereby created a style that is identifiable at a glance, proving that it's perfectly possible to design and manufacture high-end fashion in Africa, that “made in Africa” is a reality and not just an idea, that Africa can create wealth through the work of its hands. The idea wasn't merely to wow the crowd at fashion shows, but to sell his collections: after all, fashion has to be economically viable. Distribution soon became another challenge: he noted the paradox in the fact that you could buy a Pierre Cardin shirt in any African capital, but it was impossible to find clothes by African designers outside their workshops. To remedy the situation, he developed *prêt-à-porter* lines and gradually expanded his network of boutiques so as to make his shirts, dresses, and scarves available everywhere from Dakar to Kinshasa, and from Luanda down to Johannesburg. Conquering the European market was of secondary importance to him: the main

thing was Africa, which he felt should become a market of enlightened, committed, and responsible consumers. So his primary goal was not to expand internationally in order to satisfy a narcissistic need for global visibility, but to carry on his consciousness-raising mission, with a subtle mix of sensitivity and passion.

He eventually became a mentor to many designers who trained in his workshop, including Gilles Touré, the late Eloi Sessou, and Momo Ché. He encouraged them to develop their own styles and instilled in them a love for a job well done and respect for the demands of the designer's trade. Training with *Pathé'0* is always a revelation, a hands-on initiation into the profession and, above all, the various hats worn by this versatile African designer. Far from what is taught at fashion school, which clearly distinguishes between the work of a fashion designer and that of a pattern-maker, *Pathé'0* always offers total immersion in every aspect of garment making – and isn't above ironing his sartorial creations himself so they're always impeccable. He is unstinting in his efforts to support young people and promote fashion as a sector with plenty of future promise in Africa. On the other hand, he always warns them of the hard work that lies in store for them. He makes fun of those who reduce fashion to creating a brand...and get discouraged when they find out that this is a job that requires determination and total commitment.

Back in the late 1980s, *Pathé'0*'s commitment to promoting African textiles was part of a new vision for the continent. Now, with African textile industries on the brink of extinction, it's a matter of urgency. While *Pathé'0* is remarkable for the continuity of his activity and the constancy of his character, it's important to point out that the textile sector as a whole has undergone a sea change over the past thirty years. In the 1980s, African capitals still suffered from a deep-seated

⁶ A dyeing and weaving process originating in Indonesia. By extension, *ikat* also means the resulting cloth.

inferiority complex vis-à-vis Western styles. And yet West Africa at the time had a very good industrial network in place for cotton processing. One of the priorities of the newly independent states around 1960 had been to equip themselves with ginning,⁷ spinning, weaving, and printing units. This context significantly benefitted craftspeople, enabling ethnic Baoulé, Yacouba, and Agni⁸ weavers, among others, to perpetuate their ancestral know-how thanks to industrial skeins with which to obtain finer and more resistant material than cotton spun on a spindle. In 1994, when France devalued the CFA franc, the situation in French-speaking West Africa changed on several levels. The price of wax print fabrics imported from Europe doubled. That proved to be a boon to the Abidjan company Uniwax, whose prices remained affordable. Thanks to the prestige of the *Ciseaux d'Or* contest launched seven years earlier and the talent of *Pathé*⁹, Uniwax took full advantage of the currency devaluation, though other factories failed to seize the opportunity. The state had a majority stake in the cotton industry in several Sahel countries, including Burkina Faso and Mali. So the governments took stock of the situation: given the cost of overhauling an industrial base that was over thirty years old, they decided to focus on exporting ginned cotton, which suddenly brought in twice as much money without any added effort. So the cotton gins could keep going despite their obsolescence. Over in Koudougou, Burkina Faso, the Faso Fani company produced skeins of yarn for the handweaving of *faso dan fani* as well as so-called “fancy” prints. The woven cloths came to be increasingly esteemed by local designers and the *faso dan fani* workshops were competitive in terms of creativity and quality of execution, but the state didn't seem to care much about the output of its spinning mills. The situation was similar in Mali, where the ginning company

⁷ Phase in cotton processing that consists in separating the fibers from the seeds, after drying.

⁸ West African ethnic groups mainly from Côte d'Ivoire.

CMDT's turnover was prioritized over the bottom-line results of the spinning and printing companies Comatex and Itema.

Prioritizing immediate financial returns over the need to restructure the textile industry turned out to be a very short-sighted policy when competition from Asia began taking the markets by storm. And when the World Trade Organization [WTO] put an end to textile import quotas in 2004, a spate of competition destroyed the most fragile African industries. Thanks to its regular investments in new machinery and its high-end positioning, Uniwax was an exception in the wax market, which is now dominated by Asian prints from China, India, and Pakistan, with a market share of over ninety-six percent. On the other hand, Faso Fani was unable to withstand the onslaught and Comatex stopped its spinning operations. After the disappearance of local yarn production, West African weavers became dependent on Asian imports. Africa has become severely deindustrialized since 2004. Local mills once organized a whole supply chain from cotton growing to sewn garments. Now the ginned cotton gets shipped off to Asia and shipped back in the form of yarn for weaving or fabric for dyeing. Not only that, but this gap in the supply chain poses a crucial problem of traceability and labeling.

So *Pathé*'s struggle is now more topical than ever. He knows that Africa is quite capable of creating wealth and adding value to its raw materials. He intends to keep raising awareness among consumers and investors, albeit without creating an artificial barrier between the wax prints of Côte d'Ivoire and handmade fabrics, for the continent's strength lies in an overall valorization of the whole gamut of textiles “made in Africa.” Fortunately, the year 2020, which France declared “Africa Year,”⁹ was a turning point. The success of the Cruise 2020 Collection, in which the House of Dior

⁹ Planned for December 2020, the celebration was postponed to mid-July 2021 due to the COVID-19 crisis.

fêted Uniwax and gave *Pathe*^o top billing, opened up the eyes of the world to Africa's talents. The recent acquisition of Ghana's ATL wax print factory by a local investor and the opening of several spinning mills in Burkina Faso at the beginning of the year likewise bode well for the future of African fashion.





Pathe'0 discovers interesting aspects that no one else sees

Jean-Louis Menudier served as chairman and CEO of Uniwax for twenty-seven years. Uniwax, part of the Vlisco Group, launched its production of wax print fabrics in 1970 and has been a leading manufacturer thereof in West Africa ever since. This interview took place in 2019, a year before he retired from management, though he still serves as a consultant to the company. Menudier now devotes his time and energy to his rubber, cocoa, and artemisa plantations and to efforts to turn degree-based into skills-based training so that young people entering the job market can be immediately operational.

You've maintained close ties to *Pathe'0* for thirty years now. How did you meet him?

We met the year I joined Uniwax, in 1994. Uniwax sponsored *Pathe'0* in a fashion show and that was the beginning of a long history between us. At first, *Pathe'0* worked with wax prints only.

He managed to capitalize on his first successes, including the Ciseaux d'Or [Golden Scissors] contest held by Uniwax, which he won in 1987. Using Uniwax's *Oiseau Rare* ["Rare Bird"] *pagne*, he designed an exceptional outfit, which was worn by the star model Angèle Zaka. That award went a long way towards making a name for him and launching his career.



Jean-Louis Menudier

Pathe'0 is a very hard worker and he's honest. He's an intelligent entrepreneur with both feet firmly on the ground, unlike some designers who confuse sales with profit when getting started... and soon sink like a stone. He's endowed with great creativity, and he's calm and collected,

and runs a tight ship. I considered him a good ambassador for our brand and our products. Whenever *Pathe'0* had good ideas, Uniwax backed him. For years, he was one of the few designers to be given free access to our entire assortment, from which he could take his pick, even on credit. I remember well the day he came in to choose a *pagne* to make shirts out of for the South African



president Nelson Mandela. I showed him one with small patterns on it that he liked a lot and he chose some very specific colors. The company gifted him the shirt because it was terrific publicity for us to have Mandela wearing Uniwax shirts designed and made by *Palhé*^o.

In terms of quantity, *Palhé*^o's output is modest. But apart from Alphadi, who founded FIMA [International Festival of African Fashion] in Niger, *Palhé*^o is certainly the only African designer to set up such a dense network of stores on the continent, which sell only his brand. Over time, *Palhé*^o has opted to work more

with fabrics other than wax prints, but he knows the door is always open to him at Uniwax.

You know the fashion scene well in the subregion: how does *Palhé*^o's work stand out from the rest?

Palhé^o is a designer with a 360-degree view of the creative process, capable of discovering interesting aspects that no one else sees.

I'll give you an example. Whenever he came to see us, I'd usually take him on a tour of the factory and we'd discuss his ideas. One day, we noticed a major flaw in a section of a *pagne* at the start of a long production run. "Marvelous!"

Palhé^o exclaimed. And I said to him, "*Palhé*^o, this is a flaw that will end in rags!" But he insisted that this was the fabric he wanted. So I gave him a few yards of it, which he used to create a single pair of pants and a shirt. *Palhé*^o made an extraordinary outfit out of a fabric that ordinarily couldn't be sold. To him, flaws are opportunities to create something special. You see, wax-based fabric always has little flaws because it goes through a series of different machines in production, each of which adds a process to the previous ones. And in each stage of processing, we always "lose" a few yards of the fabric until the new machine is adjusted and the pattern comes out just right. *Palhé*^o showed strength in being so creative with these irregular pieces of cloth.

How did the collaboration come about between Uniwax and the Dior fashion house in Paris?

Dior's artistic director Maria Grazia Chiuri got in touch with us through Anne Grosfilley, a specialist who has written several books about wax prints and African fabrics. The Dior team came to see us at the Uniwax factory in Abidjan and asked us to create a series of "made in Africa" wax prints using patterns that belonged to them, which they wanted to make over in wax-print style before including them in their Cruise 2020 Collection. Our creative team promptly got to work designing a collection of forty-two designs based on Dior's specifications. The fabrics were then presented at the Dior fashion show in Marrakech. *Palhé*^o opened the show with a speckled blue shirt, using a secret technique of his, with a picture of Nelson Mandela on the back. The inclusion of wax prints in this collection goes to show how far partnerships with big brands can go - which is going to whet the appetites of other major groups. And we're



actually seeing a big boom in African fashion at the international level.

What do you think of the debate about whether wax prints are African? Some people feel that wax prints smack of colonialism.

We need to put paid to this whole debate. As everyone knows, wax prints are of Indonesian, and not African, origin. Dutch merchants brought wax prints back from Indonesia - which was a Dutch colony at the time - and introduced them to West Africa in the nineteenth century, mainly in what was once called the Gold Coast. West Africans took a shine to this fabric and culturally appropriated it, so wax prints have now become a distinctive feature of the local culture. Everything starts somewhere. African culture has wholly appropriated the designs and given them names. Uniwax *pagnes* are now purely Ivorian creations. All our company's designers are Africans except for the head of the design team. When we buy designs from outsiders, they have generally been trained - or are being trained - at the Technical



Center for Applied Arts in Bingerville, a town about twenty kilometers from Abidjan.¹

How do you fight against the invasion of imitations?

The problem started in the late 1980s with imitations from Nigeria and now, since

2003, from China. The only difficulty for China is that it's always "racing against the clock": Chinese copies take seven weeks to hit West African markets. So the main thrust of our efforts is to increase our level of creativity and create "faster than the copiers can

copy." In 1994, we were producing 150 new designs a year, but very soon we shot up to 1,000 a year, and now we create about 1,400 designs a year. Since the turn of the millennium, we have become one of Africa's most advanced companies in terms of innovation and processing designs into products. With the technology we've developed over the past few years, consumers can order a wax print in the color of their choice on their cell phones, add a photo or logo and receive delivery within a few days. This type of order has a bright future. We're also making sure to improve the quality of our fabrics and continuously promote our classic designs. This strategy has proven successful, for Uniwax has managed to grow and radically modernize over the years, whereas most of the other textile mills in West Africa have disappeared. They made the mistake of trying to compete with Chinese prices, which

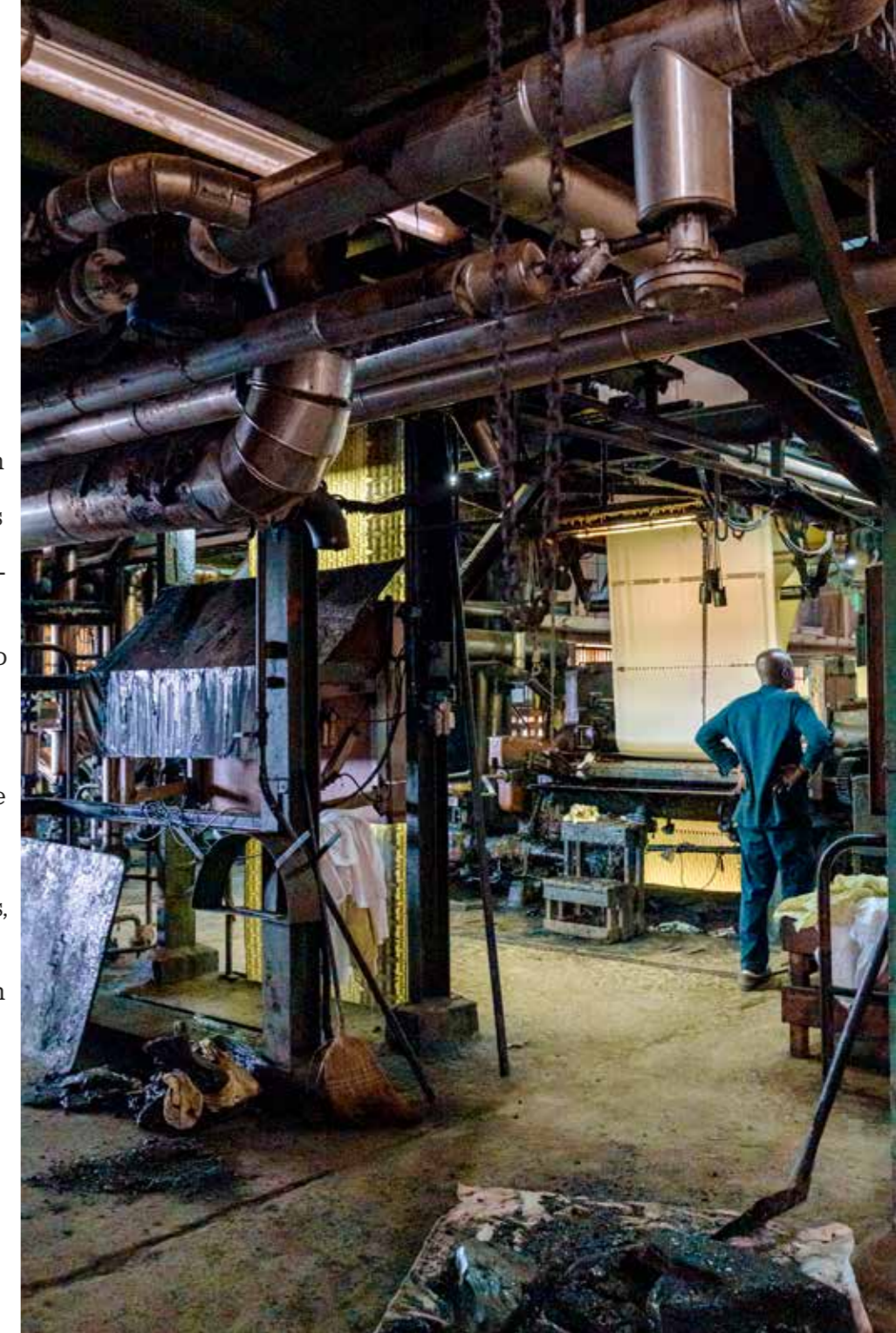
never works. Uniwax fabrics cost three times as much as Chinese imitations!

Uniwax was also founded with a view to adding value to locally grown cotton, which, however, isn't local processed anymore.

I see big trucks on the highways from the northern cotton-growing regions of Côte d'Ivoire loaded with bales of cotton on their way to the port of Abidjan. This exceptionally high-quality cotton fiber gets shipped off all the way to China, where it's processed into fabric, which has led to the disappearance of our local mills. The ultimate irony of all this is that the same fabric then gets shipped back to Côte d'Ivoire to flood the informal sector with copies of our own wax prints. Ivorian factories used to produce "fancy" fabrics, which are of inferior quality to wax prints, as they're only printed on one side, and which anyone could afford. But they all closed down owing to the invasion of cheap Chinese products. The cotton mill that used to supply us went under in 2002. It's important for Africa to have cotton fiber processed locally for the manufacture of high-quality clothes. I'm in talks with partners right now and hoping that in a few years we'll be seeing the creation of spinning and weaving factories here in Côte d'Ivoire, and in West Africa as a whole.

Do you share *Pathe*'s concern about the lack of investment in the creative industries?

¹ Under Menudier's management, Uniwax was committed to working exclusively with local designers.



It's important for Uniwax to support aspiring young designers. We've initiated a number of efforts to promote local talents who are just starting out in the fashion industry. This was one of my main objectives in starting up *Uniwax* magazine. For years, all the garments featured in the magazine that were made out of Uniwax fabrics were also listed in our store windows, along with the designers' names and contact information. Young people starting out in

fashion design often want to go too fast, in some cases due to a lack of financial means. It's important to make sure their first successes don't lead them to make mistakes. You've got to find your style. Working with a designer like *Pathe* or Gilles Touré can help you start your own business later on. People working in creative industries like fashion don't receive any subsidies. The European Union does provide some subsidies, but over the past few decades there was absolutely



nobody here in Côte d'Ivoire supporting the designers' projects, so it was really up to the companies concerned to encourage them. I often say to manufacturers, "Look out for the welfare of your sub-contractors and tastemakers because you can't make it without them." Tailors, stylists, and fashion designers are the ones who use our products and recommend them to their customers. So we have to take good care of these people and see to their professional development and their future.



Nuage: A success story

Aïssata Sylla and Halima Diagana have been *Pathe*'s go-to dyers for many years. Both are in their fifties, based in Treichville, Abidjan, and descended from generations of Soninké dyers originally from Mali. With a team of up to a dozen women each, they dye the fabrics *Pathe* uses for his world-renowned shirts, tunics, and trousers. Developed in collaboration with

Pathe, the vivid and very diverse motifs and colors of the printed fabrics are strikingly beautiful and readily recognizable. They are given special names like *Moucheté* ["Flecked" or "Speckled"], *Nuage* ["Cloud"], *Tableau* ["Painting"], *Salade* ["Salad"], *Bougie* ["Candle"] or *Soleil* ["Sun"]. Some of them, such as *Moucheté*, involve dyeing techniques handed down to



Halima Diagana



Aïssata Sylla

Sylla and Diagana by their families; others are the fruit of their imagination. "*Pathe* orders the patterns he needs from us," Aïssata Sylla explains. "But he also encourages us to create new colors and patterns, so the repertoire is constantly growing thanks to our ideas."

Before working for *Pathe*, Sylla sold dish towels, cloth napkins, and tablecloths, which she dyed herself, on

the street and to private customers. She also offered to dye people's old clothes to give them a new lease on life. Since she started working exclusively for the famous designer, her life has changed. Not only has she been able to raise her children and pay their way through college, but she is even building a house for herself in Deux Plateaux, a residential neighborhood in Abidjan.

"You can't work for the same person for sixteen years unless it's someone who's kind, who encourages you, appreciates your work, and provides for your financial security," she says. "*Pathe* does all that."

Sylla works in a part of Treichville called Biafra. She practices her art of dyeing in a rented shed along the banks of the Ébrié Lagoon.¹ "At first,



I didn't want to learn dyeing because it's dirty," she recalls. "My grandmother had to beat me till I gave in. But I'm grateful to her today because it enabled me to raise my four children after my husband died." So a picture of her grandmother is now prominently displayed alongside those of other family members on the walls of her home.

Pathe^o supplies her with light, unbleached, white cotton fabric of excellent quality from Germany, Austria, China, and India, which is purchased in Benin or Dubai. She buys the dyes of many different colors herself, which she mixes and boils with

lye and other chemicals. Her suppliers are located in Bamako, the capital of Mali; Bouaké, a city in central Côte d'Ivoire; and Treichville. It takes a good twenty-four hours to drive all the way to Bamako. On the way back, she has to pay sometimes extortionate customs duties on each barrel of dye powder or lye. "That sometimes comes to as much as 75,000 CFA francs" – roughly €115. "The customs officials blackmail me, accusing me of smuggling drugs since the lye comes in the form of a white powder, though they know full well it's not true." So instead of going to Mali, she prefers to stock up

in Bouaké, which is well supplied with dyes by the local Malian community. "There are more and more Chinese dyes, too, but they're poor quality," she adds. "So if you're not careful, you can get ripped off, and then you've got a problem because the dye washes out."

Once she's got all the raw materials together, Sylla and her team mix the dyes in just the right doses to obtain the desired hues. The women boil the dyes under a tin roof beside the bare shells of abandoned cars and rusty old barrels. The contents of the pots are then poured into several plastic kettles similar



the cloths there," she explains. "If not, we carry them in basins to an area nearby called 'the garden,' where they dry on the grass." "The garden" is in fact the center of a large roundabout on the road to Le Plateau, Abidjan's business district. One can't help wondering whether passing motorists even notice these multicolored fabrics spread out on the grass, let alone imagine that they'll be cut and sewn into shirts worn by presidents, stars of showbiz, and captains of industry in and well beyond the confines of Côte d'Ivoire.

"The fabrics dry better over there. But someone has to keep an eye on them all the time, otherwise they get soiled by animals walking all over them and have to be rewashed." Horses, sheep, and chickens do like to pay a visit to "the garden" now and then. Not to mention passersby stopping to rest for a while on the grass there, who might be tempted to walk off with some of the colorful cloths. Not only that, but local government officials routinely drop in on Sylla to take a little cash off her hands: "Sometimes I have to pay them

off as much as 5,000 CFA francs just to let me dry my fabrics there without any hassle for a single day."

The dried fabric subsequently undergoes its last stage of processing in the open air as well: it is spread out on a wooden slab and beaten with a large, flat wooden mallet to give the fabric a beautiful lustrous hue. This is long, hard, backbreaking work, for which Sylla employs men. After this thorough beating, the fabric is finished at long last and the precious cargo can be delivered to *Pathe*^o.

1 Dyeing processes pose a threat to the survival of various aquatic animal and plant species as well as to human health, because the dye baths and wastewater discharged into the lagoon contain toxic chemicals.



The making of *Moucheté, Nuage, Tableau, Salade, and Soleil*



Aissata Sylla and Halima Diagana, two very experienced artisans with their own team of women to support them, have been dyeing cloth for *Palbé*¹⁰ for years. Diagana and Sylla belong to Côte d'Ivoire's Malian Soninké community, a Mandé group known as traders, weavers, and dyers - indeed, Halima Diagana's entire family are fabric dyers. While her grandmother used to collect leaves and flowers to make the dyes herself, the women now buy them in synthetic powder form. Their dyeing method is derived from traditional indigo resist-dyeing techniques. Indigo, called *gara* in many Mandé languages, is extracted from various plants in West Africa. Today, the term *gara* is often used to refer to all dyed fabrics.

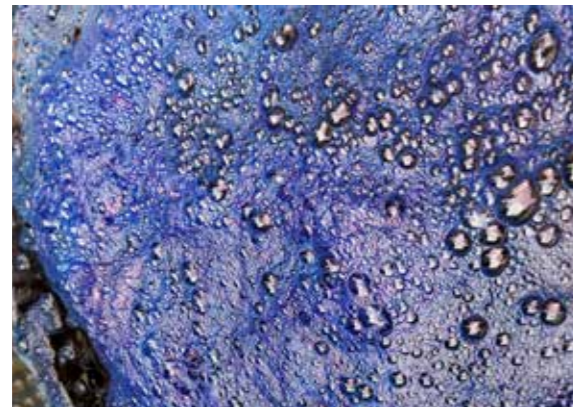
01 Dye and chemical mordants

In West Africa, plant-based dyes have now largely been replaced by imported synthetic ones. Halima Diagana buys her dye powder in small plastic sachets from Sylla Ladj, her local supplier, along with two other essential ingredients: hydrosulfite and sodium hydroxide. Dyeing textiles is an important source of income for women, but while these synthetic products have shortened the process, the chemicals they contain pose numerous health risks: the dyers themselves are at risk from a lack of protective equipment, and untreated waste from the dyeing process are dangerous pollutants that impact people's health and the environment.



02 Dye bath

Water for the dye bath is heated in a metal bowl on a charcoal stove. When the water boils, the dye, sodium hydroxide, and sodium hydrosulfite are added and dissolved. The chemicals help the cotton fibers absorb and fix the dye, making the fabric colorfast. The women are constantly developing new color variations by mixing or dosing the dyes differently.



03 Preparing the cloth

Palhé'0 supplies Diagana and Sylla with a white cotton cloth that is lightweight and of very good quality. The women dip the cloth in water before bathing it in manioc starch, which stiffens the fabric in preparation for the next stage of the dyeing process.

04 Dyeing techniques

To piece dye fabrics in a single color, entire lengths of cloth are dipped into the dye bath. For more complex multicolored patterns, a mechanical resist-dye method is used. Though various resist-dye techniques have been developed across cultures the world over, they all rely on the same basic principle: blocking certain areas from receiving the dye so as to allow lighter colors to sit next to darker shades. Halima Diagana and Aïssata Sylla have updated and developed the techniques learned from their grandmothers to create smaller, more contemporary patterns to suit *Palhé'0*'s collections.



05 b

Different dye baths are then carefully poured onto the folded fabric using a plastic kettle, one color at a time. Because the kettle's narrow spout allows the color to be applied to specific areas, different patterns can be created. The final design results from both the gathering of the cloth and where the dye is poured.



05 Patterning method

The now wet white cloth is laid out on a plastic sheet on the ground. Experienced dyers then fold, crumple, pluck, and twist the fabric into a three-dimensional form; this prevents the dye from reaching certain parts of the cloth, such as in the folds, while allowing exposed areas to absorb the color more freely. The manioc starch the fabric was dipped into earlier helps keep the stiffened fabric in place as the dye is applied.



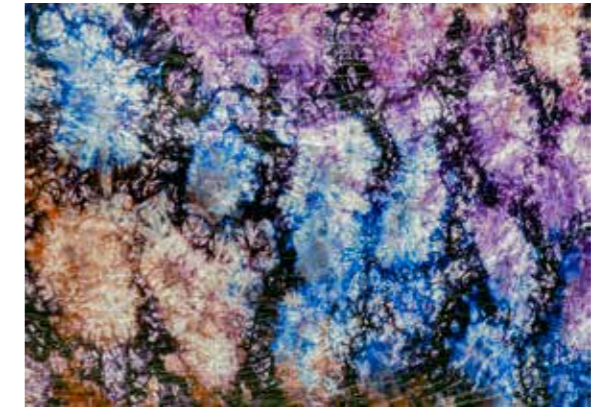
Popular designs

Ideas, says Halima Diagana, are God's gift to African women. The colors and patterns that these skilled dyers create for *Palhé'0* are essential to the beauty of his collections. *Le Tableau* ["Painting"], *La Salade* ["Salad"], *Le Nuage* ["Cloud"], *Le Moucheté* ["Flecked"], *La Bougie* ["Candle"], and *Le Soleil* ["Sun"] are just some of the names the women give these patterns, who are constantly inventing new designs and color combinations.



06 b

The delicate *Nuage* design is created by tightly bunching the fabric into tiny pleats. The *Salade* design is similar except that it requires slightly wider pleats. To make the larger *Tableau* pattern, the fabric is twisted into loosely spaced circular folds. The *Moucheté* design, which uses a very old Soninké technique, is produced by laying the wet, pre-dyed fabric on the ground and sprinkling it with indigo powder.



07 Washing and drying

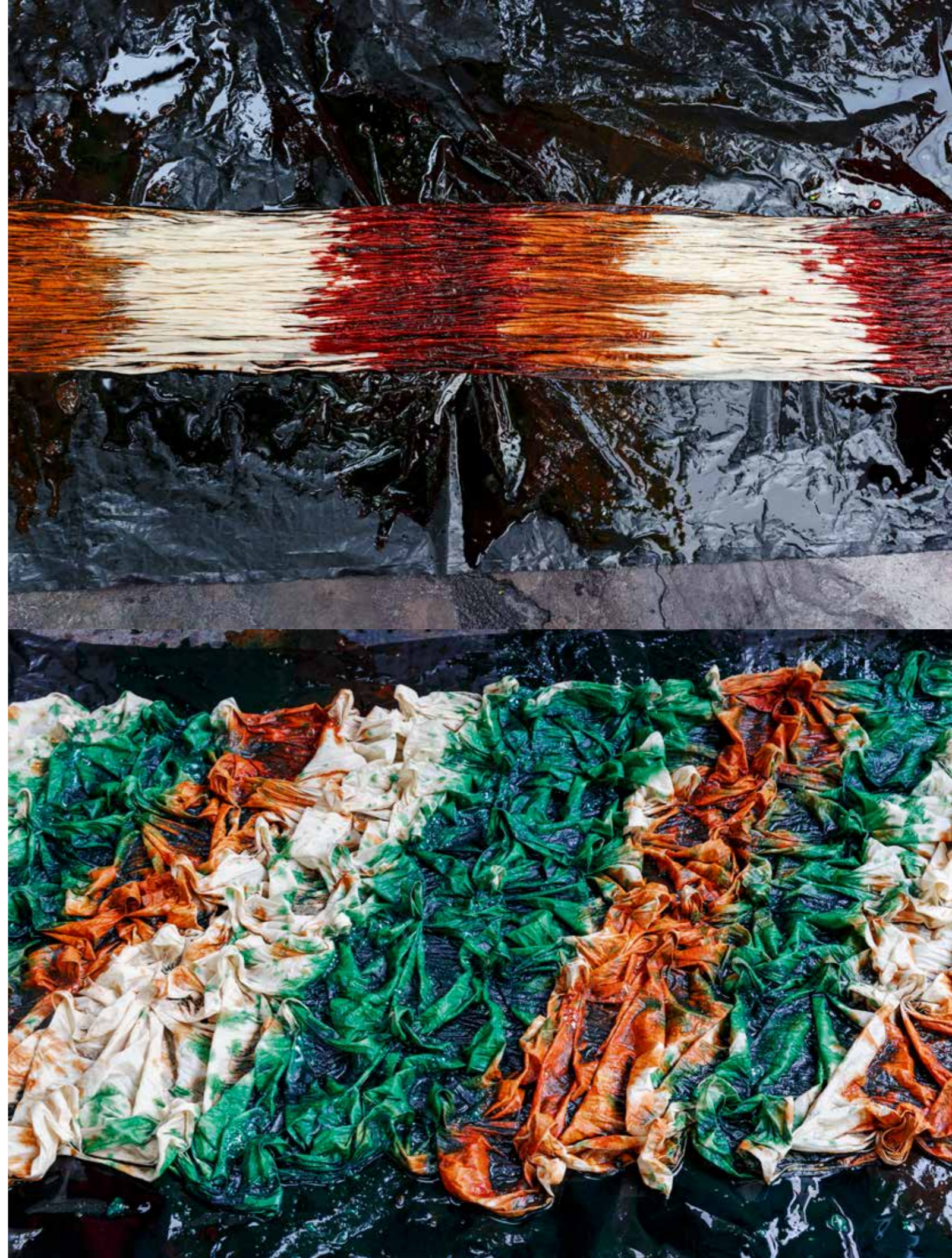
Once the dye has been applied, the fabric is left to absorb the color. The cloth is then washed three times with soap and water, to remove any chemical dye residues, before being wrung and hung or laid out to dry in the sun.



08 Finishing

Still in the open air, the dried fabric enters the final stage of the dyeing process when it is soaked in cassava starch and dried again. This step is part of the traditional finishing process that gives the colors their brilliance. With this method, once dry, the fabric is not ironed but beaten on a wooden block with large, flat wooden bats - a job for which Diagana and Sylla hire men whose profession it is to do this. The finished fabrics are completely dried before being carefully folded and delivered to *Palhé*°.



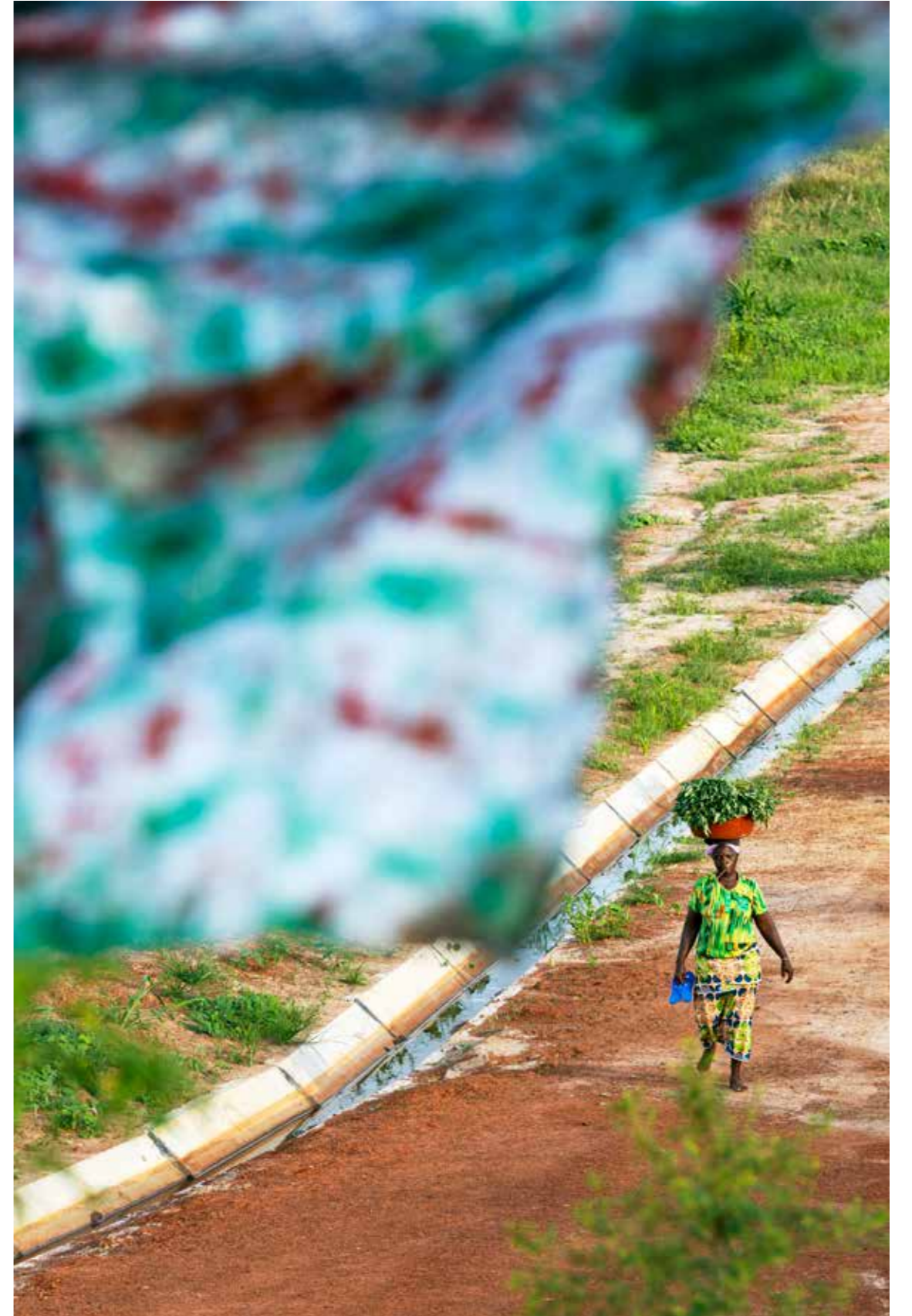




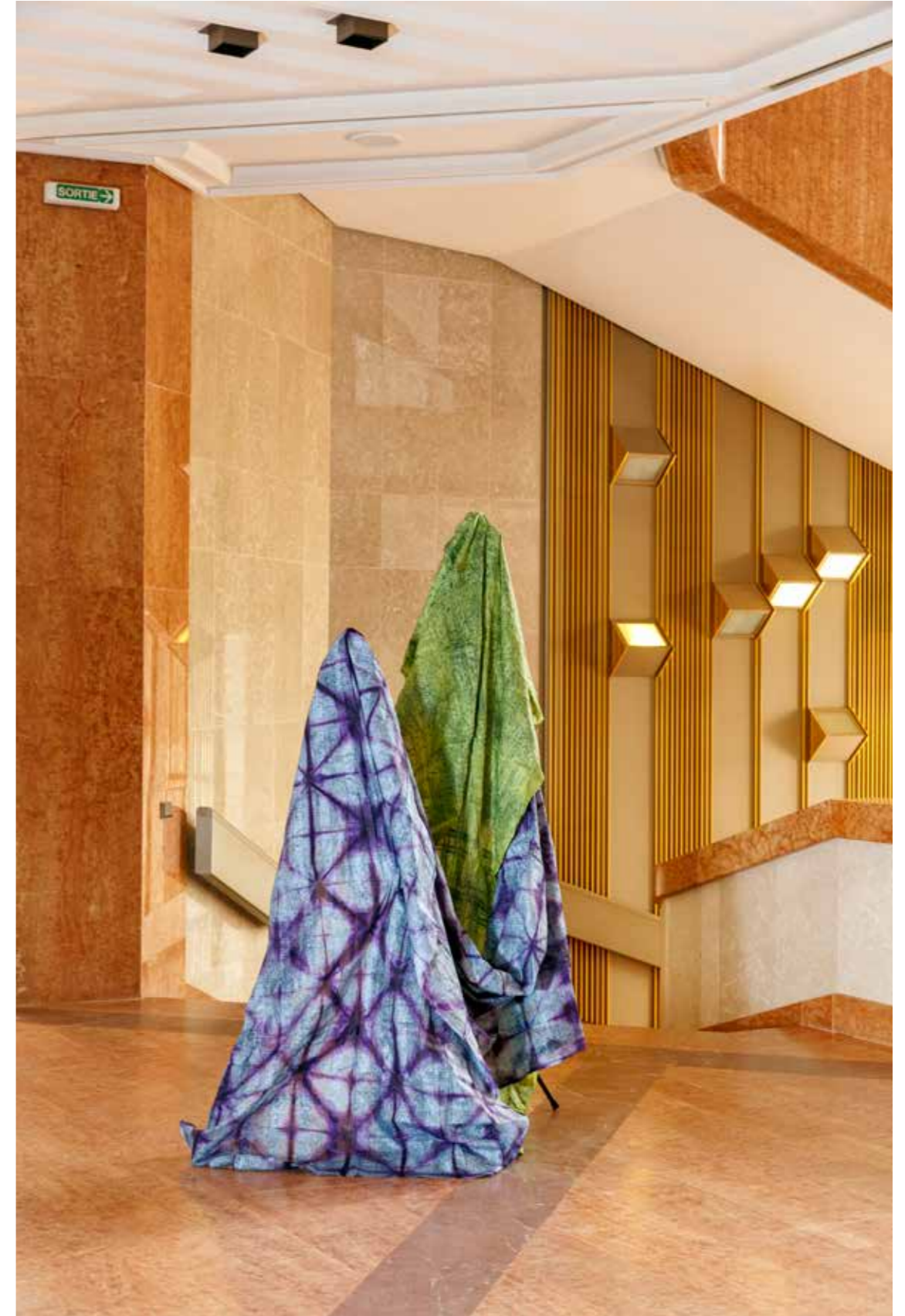


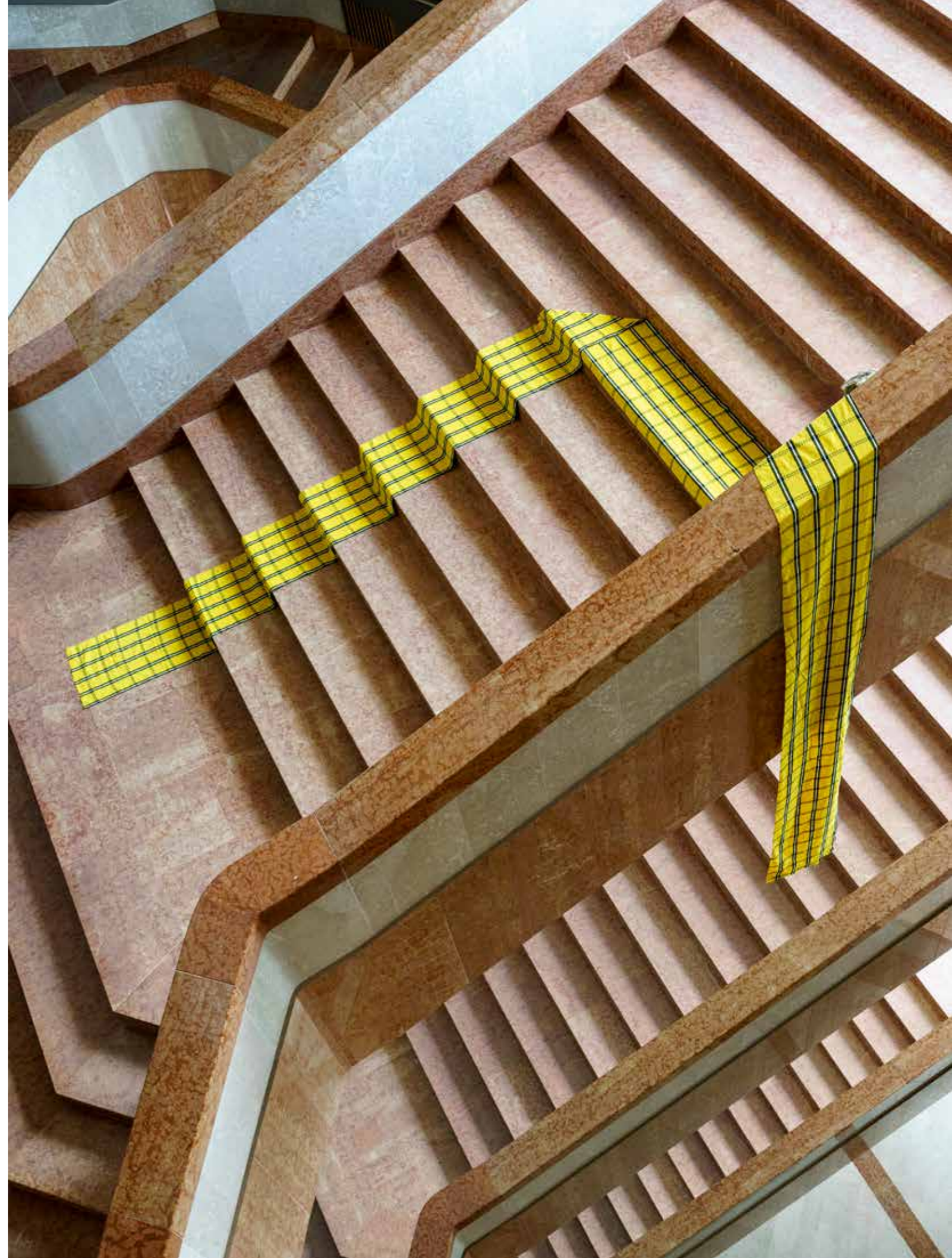
















The making of *faso dan fani*

The UAP Godé women's cooperative in Ouagadougou



01 Choosing the thread

To create high-quality *faso dan fani*, only the best thread must be used. The UAP Godé women purchase undyed cotton thread from Filsah, the Burkinabé factory in Bobo-Dioulasso, that is made from locally grown long staple cotton. The thread comes in skeins, which are lengths of yarn wound into an oval shape.



02 Dyeing the thread

The women dye the thread using synthetic colorfast dyes from Europe. Care is needed when dyeing the skeins so as to avoid the thread becoming tangled and unusable. After dyeing, the thread is rinsed to remove any excess dye. It is then laid on the ground and dried in the sun.



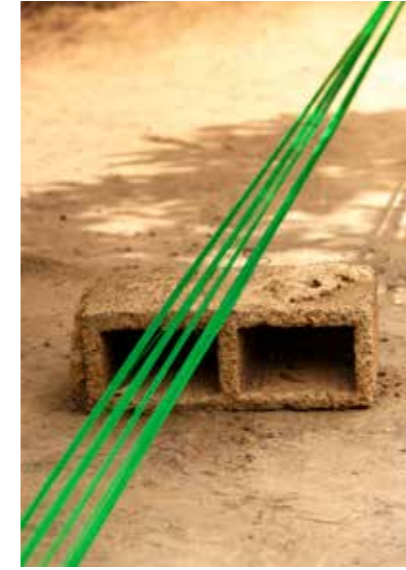
03 Preparing the warp

To make the warp, skeins are transferred onto a rotating device called a swift; the women unwind the skeins around pegs planted in the ground, which prevents the thread from becoming tangled. The number of threads used determines the width of the cloth. To produce a striped cloth, different colored threads must be unwound in a particular order, and then placed on the loom in that same order.



04 Preparing the shafts

The loom's two shafts must be prepared before the warp is placed onto them. The heddles are suspended from the shaft and each heddle has an eye in the center through which the warp will later be threaded. The heddle separates and pulls the warp thread up when the shaft is lifted, allowing the weft to be passed under it during weaving. Because one heddle is needed for every thread of warp, the shaft may hold over a hundred heddles. It is important to put the correct number of heddles on each shaft so as to ensure that each warp thread has its own heddle and is attached to only one of the shafts. Heddles can be made from metal, thread, or reed - each weaver has their own preference, though metal heddles are the easiest to thread because the eyes are often angled - but, whatever they are made from, they must be correctly aligned on the shaft.



05 Threading the heddles and the beater

To begin dressing a loom with a warp, each warp thread is passed through a heddle eye on one of the shafts. The order in which they are threaded determines the weave structure of the cloth. For *faso dan fani*, the warp is threaded in an alternating shaft order, creating an over-under-over-under path for the weft thread to be woven through. Once that is done, each warp thread is passed through the beater reed. This process, called sleying, helps determine the final width of the cloth. To make threading the heddles easier, the women sometimes leave a length of warp on the heddles and reed so that the new warp can be tied onto the old threads and simply pulled through.



06 Winding the warp

The final step in dressing a loom is tying and winding the long warp onto the back bar. Each thread in the warp must be pulled to the same tension as it is wound on - this involves many highly skilled hands. At the UAP Godé cooperative, it usually takes five to six women to achieve this, rolling stiff paper onto the bar in order to keep the different levels of thread separated. The wider the warp, the more difficult it is to maintain an even tension. For smaller looms that weave narrower cloths, the warp is not wound on. Instead, it is held taught by a weighted sled that is pulled forward by the weaver. This is the tradition-based warping method used by many weavers who work on wooden looms throughout West Africa.



07 Weaving the cloth

The thread woven through the warp is called the weft. The weft is wound onto spools and placed in a wooden shuttle that is passed through the warp. Foot pedals control the shafts; the shuttle is passed through the warp with one shaft raised, before returning with the opposite shaft raised. Sometimes, additional patterns are woven into the cloth in small sections. The women use a smoothed stick to select and raise the threads they need for the pattern they are creating. A different color thread is passed through that section of warp, creating what is called a weft-float pattern. *Pathé*'s signature motif is made using this time-consuming process.



08 Finishing the cloth

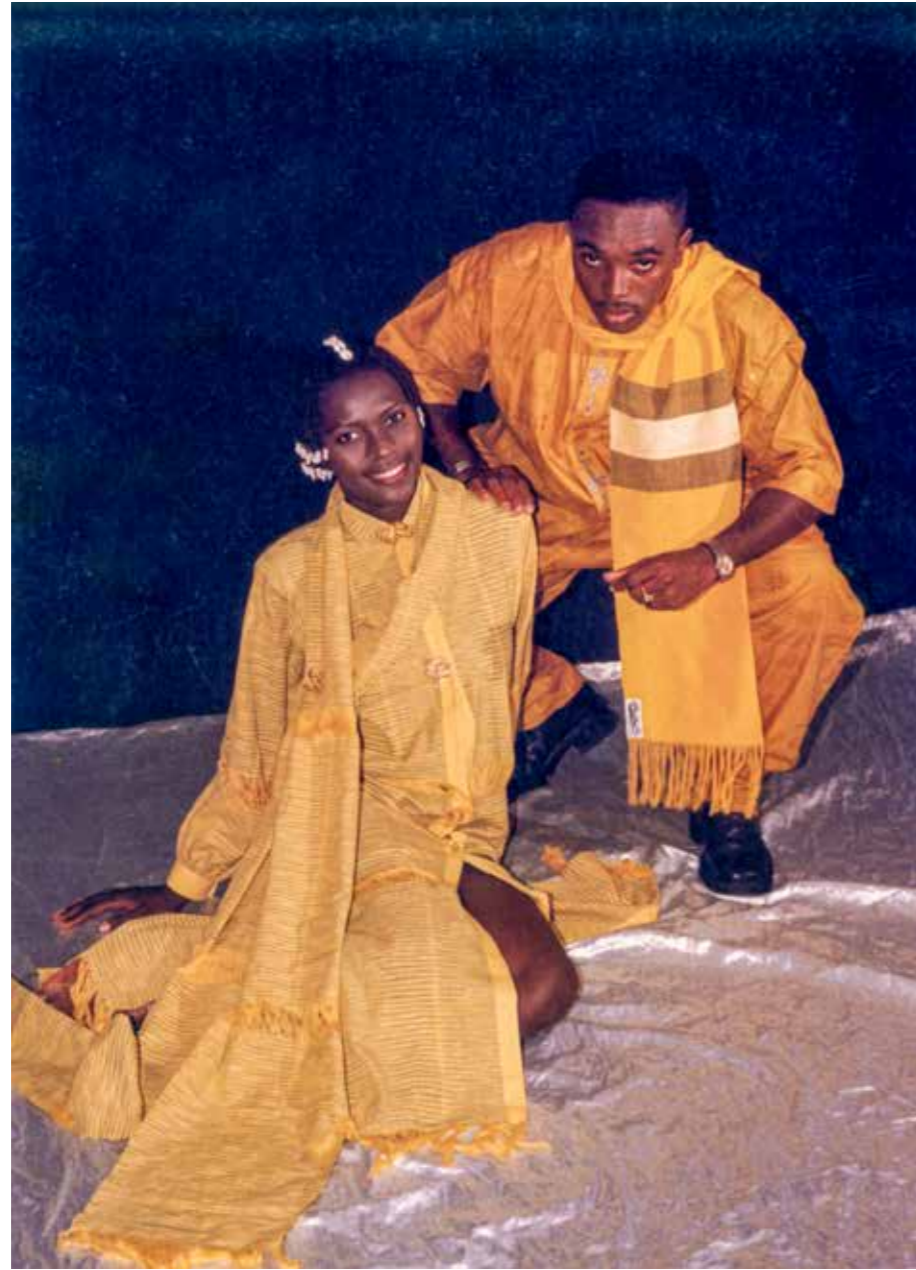
Depending on the weaver and the pattern, it can take anywhere from three to ten days to weave a piece of cloth. Once finished, the cloth is taken off the loom, any loose ends - which are a natural part of the weaving process - are trimmed, then it is smoothed by hand and folded.



09 Grading the cloth

Lastly, the cloth is inspected and logged in the cooperative's notebook. Each weaver has a pattern or set of patterns that they typically weave. The weaver, pattern, date it was woven, size, and price are all noted down. The cloth is then sent to the store to be sold or put aside for whoever commissioned the cloth.





Myunan bi jama la bɛn “Patience builds a country”

Marka faso dan fani proverb¹

The beginning

The beginning is never the beginning. There is always something that came before – especially when it comes to textiles, which is an art that is nearly as old as human existence. Yet in the eyes of recent art history, it is very modern because it manifests the quintessentially “modern” balance of form and function. Yes, there is cloth that is made to merely garb oneself and others, just as there are houses that are constructed to simply shelter a group of people. But when a house is designed with aesthetics and the environment in mind, this process is elevated to the art of architecture. The same is true of textiles. When designing cloth that is aesthetically pleasing as well as comfortable and functional, this creation is no longer considered a craft; instead, it is an art.

The problem with art, as any student of an introductory art history

class can attest, is that there is no single standard definition of what defines it. Generally speaking, we know art when we see it, and each of us may hold different standards as to what constitutes art. In Europe and North America, the concept of “art for art’s sake” has consequently formed a group of people who believe that art has no function beyond being art. In Africa, much of what Europe considers “traditional” African art does have the modern balance of form and function. The result is that many Africans view art as something integrated into their lives, something to not only be seen but also used for the good of society. Indeed, even the designation of “traditional” is a misnomer, as many African textile artists work simultaneously in both a classic style as well as their own, combining “traditional” and “contemporary.” This blurs the lines of what many Europeans and North Americans consider a dichotomy of time.

Genevieve Hill-Thomas holds a PhD in the History of Art from Indiana University, Bloomington. Her dissertation, *Faso dan fani: Marka textiles in Burkina Faso*, was supported by a Fulbright Fellowship. She is currently

a faculty member at the Ringling College of Art and Design, where she combines her love of African art history with her background as an art teacher and textile artist working in weaving, knitting, and dyeing.

¹ This essay is dedicated to all Burkinabé artists who produce *faso dan fani*, as well as to those who design with it, the Burkinabé people who choose to wear it, the Burkinabé elders who pass on their knowledge of it