



Novas "tendências" de moda: a alfaiataria de quimono em desenhos de vestidos parisienses, africanos e indianos

New fashion "orientations": the tailoring of kimono in Parisian, African, and Indian dress designs



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[resumo] O quimono convida a transformação, seja como fibra, como tecido, como moda ou material cultural, desde as primeiras etapas de sua concepção até seu consumo. Criado por *designers* japoneses para um público japonês, o quimono mantém suas principais características ao mesmo tempo em que atende às novas tendências e exigências. Fora do Japão, o quimono, através do tempo, encontrou uma variedade de territórios onde pôde prosperar como um item de moda. Uma variedade de *designers* não japoneses reimaginaram e personalizaram o quimono, vendo suas mangas, cores, superfícies e dimensões de material negociadas por meio de uma nova estrutura. Um exemplo importante analisado aqui são os desenhos de Vitali Babani, criados em Paris durante o «pico» do Japonismo (1900-1930). A segunda categoria considerada a seguir é o quimono confecionado com tecidos africanos encerados e *kanga*, conforme desenvolvido pelas marcas contemporâneas WAfrica, Lezele e Über Dandy Kimono. Uma terceira categoria, utilizando a técnica específica de tingimento de quimono de *Kyō-Yūzen*, será discutida devido sua recente transformação da paleta "icônica" do quimono e seus temas para o mundo do sari indiano. Os três exemplos, variando em seu tempo e características materiais, proporcionam um terreno rico para discutir a "niponicidade" do quimono e como ele é negociado e adaptado como uma peça de vestuário usada em corpos reais, assim como uma presença midiática-pictórica. Este artigo analisa estas três categorias de "tendências" de quimono, primeiro analisando como estas práticas de *design* se interconectam materialmente com o quimono, com foco no tipo de bricolagem que está em ação. Em segundo lugar, a discussão explora como os desenhos são exibidos e anunciados, interrogando-se sobre a oferta, demanda e luxo.

[palavras-chave] **Quimono. Globalização da moda. Orientalismo. Mídiação da moda.**

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[abstract] Kimono, in many regards, invites transformation. Whether it is a fiber, woven cloth, fashion statement, or cultural material, from the first steps of its conception until its consumption, kimono is naturally an agency infused with the possibility of change, which has different modalities. Created by Japanese designers for a Japanese audience, the kimono retains its key characteristics while addressing new trends and demands. Outside of Japan it found territories where it thrives as a malleable, fashionable item. As a result, a variety of non-Japanese designers reimagined and customized the kimono, seeing its sleeves, colors, surfaces, and material dimensions negotiated through many variables. The first examples examined in this article are the kimono designs of Vitali Babani, created in Paris during the “peak” of Japonisme (1900s to 1930s). The second category is the kimono tailored with African wax and *kanga* fabrics, as developed by the contemporary brands WAfrica, Lezele, and Über Dandy Kimono. A third example, using the specific kimono dyeing technique of Kyō-Yūzen, will be discussed for its inclusion of the kimono unique palette of motifs and colors into the aesthetic of the Indian sari. These three tendencies, varying in their time and material characteristics, provide a rich terrain to discuss the “Japaneseness” of the kimono outside Japan. They also provide perspectives on how kimono has been negotiated to be a garment that goes on real bodies as well as on media platforms. This article analyzes these three categories of kimono “orientations” by first looking at how these design practices work materially, with a focus on the type of textile bricolage that is at work. Secondly, it explores how the designs are displayed and advertised, interrogating offer, demand, luxury, and media presence.

[keywords] Kimono. Fashion globalization. Orientalism. Japonisme. Fashion mediatization.

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Introduction

Kimono fashion is a complex area of study, as kimono wearers and their sense of personal experience of class, time, place, and occasion are dialed via a multitude of changes. Variations come through motifs, colors, and layers, taking into account the different qualities of fabrics and textured combinations available all the while staying within the same parameters in terms of silhouette, which has remained rather immutable over time.

In other words, any kimono practitioner (and designer) navigates a dress format in which drawing, dyeing, weaving, and embroidering are appreciated fully for their visual and sensual aspects, understanding how they hold a major place in conveying one’s identity, a sense of place, and taste. As Liza Dalby noted:

The contours of kimono [...] are highly conservative. They shift the issue of fashion away from shape to the areas of color, pattern and decorative detail. The flat, unbroken sections of kimono have provided an excellent, consistent canvas for display of the dyer's art, painter's imagination, and embroiderer's skill. Pattern and color date a kimono more surely than its shape. (DALBY, 2002 [1993], p.18)

With such qualities, kimono “versatile” designs naturally bring refreshing variables to Western ways of tailoring and dressing, as it is a stylish “wrapped” item that does not rely on wild changes in the way sleeves, shoulders, bodice, and skirt parts are presented, but it does rely on elements that tend to be ignored in the West (or at least put in the background). By its very nature, kimono undermines the yardstick with which the West measures the degree of fashionability in garments and through this, it interrogates the hegemony of Western fashion discourses (FRANCKS, 2015). Moreover, by looking at how kimono colors, motifs, and textures revolve often on the marking of seasons, kimono outfits and styles effectively avoid the usual cyclicity so prevalent in the construction and consumption of Western dress. Displaying carefully either spring, summer, fall, and winter variations is a big component in the kimono's grammar and this coded “syntax” demonstrates how one can be fashionable while dressing in classic, recurrent sets of colors and/or patterns. Year after year, one can indeed continue to rotate the same sets of kimono without the fear of being labeled “old fashioned.”

As Moriguchi Kako asserted:

A fine kimono is an adornment like the jewels and furs worn by a European woman. Although the form of garment never changes, a custom-made kimono is a courtier gown and also an original work by a creative artist. A splendid kimono is apt to be handed down from one generation to the next like a painting or a piece of jewelry. Kimonos are not created to seasonal fads, but are designed as raiment that will contribute to Japan's tradition of beauty. (MORIGUCHI in MUNSTERBERG, 1996, p.3)

More precisely, kimono styles are born from the love for repetitions. Motifs of plum and cherry blossoms, maple leaves, and bell flowers, for instance, are timeless favorites, regardless of the age of the wearer or the time period. These seasonal choices are further consolidated by national, local, and personal discourses that are echoing a love for references, may they be coming from famous texts, poems, popular imagery, theater, or the kimono industry itself.

The display of nature through kimono dyed or woven outfits also demonstrates a deep sensitivity to how the sun, rain, rivers, clouds, flowers, foliage, and plants grace the world and by concomitance how elegantly human beings can inhabit their reality, a reality that is ever moving, ever going back to its essentials as one, ultimately, only want to look warm in the crisp spring and autumn days, cool in the hot and humid summer, and cosy in the chilly winter.

With all the dimensions mentioned above, it is clear how kimono, from the first steps of its conception until its consumption, invites profound material flexibility and transformation, as it is supported by a culture that cherishes transitions and adaptability, while dwelling within specific rules and sartorial tenets. Japanese designers have long demonstrated their ability to develop kimono fashion with these key characteristics while addressing new trends and demands of the Japanese audience and market.

From the early Edo-period proliferation of pattern books or *hinagatabon* (KYŌTO NATIONAL MUSEUM, 1999; NAGOYA CITY MUSEUM; SUNTORY MUSEUM, 2008; LI, 2020), to the Reiwa era designers producing pieces for fashion-week catwalks (CLIFFE, 2017; JACKSON, 2020; TŌKYO NATIONAL MUSEUM, 2020), the kimono continues to stay the same and evolve simultaneously. Similarly, the kimono experienced outside of Japan, while targeting niche markets, is equally diverse. It has thrived as a fashionable and innovative dress item in a variety of cultures. Customized and reimaged by non-Japanese designers, the kimono therefore keeps seeing its sleeves, colors, surfaces, and material dimensions negotiated through new mindsets (MORISHIMA, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to compare the similarities and differences of three types of such “kimono outside Japan” designs, as they vary in their characteristics but share common traits in terms of “orienting” kimono fashion in an innovative manner. Whether they are using a kimono “Japonisme” approach, exploring the limits of kimono language and kimono reform, or following the logic of a more radical “fragmentation” of kimono, isolating only one kimono characteristic and meshing it into a completely different form of dress, the examples analyzed in this article provide a rich terrain to discuss the “Japaneseness” of kimono outside Japan. They also provide perspectives on how kimono has been negotiated to be a garment that goes on real bodies as well as on media platforms. More concretely, following the framework phrased by Karen Tranberg Hansen:

New works demonstrate that fashion no longer is an exclusive property of the West. Contemporary fashions are created rapidly and in great volume from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, redefining both consumption and fashion itself in the process and propelling multidirectional style shifts across the globe. [...] While clothes are among our most personal possessions, they are also an important consumption good. [...] This accessibility not only facilitates individualism but also pushes the diversification of tastes in numerous directions, turning local consumers into arbiters of stylistic innovations that are contributions to the breakdown of fashion’s Western hegemony. (HANSEN, 2004, pp. 370–373)

This article looks at the kimono designs of Vitali Babani, created in Paris during the “peak” of Japonisme (1900s to 1930s); the contemporary kimono tailored with African wax and *kanga* fabrics, as developed by the brands WAfrica, Lezele, and Über Dandy Kimono; and the Yūzen-sari designs, which apply the specific kimono Kyō-Yūzen dyeing technique into Indian sari.

Firstly, it looks at how these three categories of kimono designs interconnect materials and highlights a new type of textile and transcultural “bricolage.” Secondly, the discussion explores how the designs have been advertised, interrogating mediatization and marketing, as well as how, with such creative kimono designs, the fashion industry can efficiently start to consider more local and inclusive tendencies.

Kimono form and reform, the elegance of bricolage

In this part, the “Japonisme” kimono, “African” kimono, and “Japanese” *sari* examples are discussed considering their materiality, the interlocking engagement of their fibers, and tailoring techniques. With such angle, one common point that appears immediately is that all the designs presented are infused in the idea of creating something different from the snug and body conscious way of tailoring that the West has emphasized over the past centuries. Put differently, these designs are hybrids that merge the visual and the sensory in a loose manner, wrapping the body more freely than any Western mode of dress could do. Meanwhile, they are advocating a degree of emancipation from national borders and national dress injunctions.

In other words, the primary common point between all three types of hybrid creations is that they all integrate a certain degree of simplicity and playfulness in dress, relying only on the flow of the folded fabrics and the power of layered combinations. As a result, through investigating the characteristics of each example further, the “orientation” of kimono in the West can be noted.

Babani

Vitali Babani (1858–1940) came from Istanbul (Constantinople) and based his activities in Paris circa 1892. Most active at the height of the Japonisme movement, he created numerous kimono inspired robes, with an attention paid to flower and plants motifs as well as the liberating looseness the wrapping technique allows. On one level, Babani’s design are a nod to the aesthetic developed by other designers operating at the time, inspired by the earlier trend of Orientalism and seamlessly getting into Japonisme. Madeleine Vionnet,² Paul Poiret,³ or Mariano Fortuny⁴ were indeed designers who integrated “indigenous / exotic” dress in their creations, such as the Turkish Kaftan (HIZKIYEV, 2022), or the Sinai Thoub dress from Egypt (MARTIN and KODA, 1994, p. 56; SHAMS, 2018). This new tendency for fashion in the West was not an isolated phenomenon but the harbinger of a whole new era for women and their way of dressing. As the September 1920 issue of *Vogue* magazine exposed:

The women of Paris have recently shown great fondness for the straight robes of Asian and Egyptian origin, lavishly colorful and simple in cut. Tunics, kimonos and gandouras have never been so fashionable, not only in the street but also in the home and even at afternoon parties. (VOGUE MAGAZINE Sept. 1920, p. 22)

² Madeleine Vionnet (1876–1975). See Vionnet’s implications with kimono in: FUKAI, Akiko “Kimono and Parisian Mode” in VAN ASSCHE, Annie, 2005, pp. 54–55. See a complete account of Vionnet’s designs and career in: KIRKE, 2012 (1998).

³ Paul Poiret (1879–1944). See Poiret’s life achievements in the following references: his autobiography (POIRET, Paul; GUEST, Stephen Haden, 2009 [1931]), as well as the entry published online on the MET museum website (KODA, Harold; BOLTON, Andrew, 2008).

⁴ There is even a strong suspicion that Babani was copying without authorization Mariano Fortuny’s models. (PALAIS GALLIERA; GROSSIORD, Sophie, 2017, pp. 200–210).

More precisely, Babani created in a time when Western fashion was looking into “Oriental” dresses in order to overcome the crisis of the corset and the inherent, ugly, distortion it imposed to the natural beauty and curves of the women’s body (CUNNINGHAM, 2003, p. 4). As phrased by Aarti Kawlra:

The dress Reform Movement of the late nineteenth century in Europe and America actually popularized the kimono as a garment alternative to tight fitting corsets, which were by now not only being seen as uncomfortable and unhealthy but also as symbols of confinement of women to their traditional feminine roles. In fact, the kimono continued to exert a strong influence on fashion as an inspiration for the lounge-wear in European and American haute couture. Many even believe that in the twentieth century the kimono’s loose flowing lines have contributed to the liberation of Western women from the restrictive clothing of the past. (KWALRA, 2002, p. 300)

On another level, it is noteworthy to see how Babani cleverly positioned himself as an importer and a producer. He was primarily a silk expert, having his shop dubbed “Le Palais des Soieries” or “The Palace of Silks” (DE LAPRADE, 1920, pp. 365–368; KRAMER and SAVAS in JACKSON, 2020, p. 188), as well as a fine observer of the society he was navigating, commercializing kimono garments that were not *ex-nihilo* but branching out of the tea gowns and artistic dresses. His angle was thus to “authentically” connect to Japan, fit Parisian urban taste, and express a new type of femininity befitting Western prerogatives. Similar to the much discussed “kimono for exports,” such as those designed by Takashimaya department store (RADO, 2015; SHIBA, 2015; SAVAS, 2017), Babani oriented his creations to express Japanese quality while acknowledging the reified consumer mind that was blooming at that time, a mind in search for liberation and cultured elegance.

The Babani “Parisian” kimono examples that can be found to this day (Figure 1 and 2) manifest all of the above concerns with, first and foremost, the wrapping that transitioned from left over right (the Japanese way for both men and women), to right over left, as it is the norm in women’s Western dress habits. The idea of making the kimono more understandable, comfortable, and “easy” for Westerners is further exposed in the fact that every piece has been fashioned with a minimum of operations: there is no back seam and the slim front panel (襦 *okumi*) that is usually placed in center front to “finish” the collar line (襟 *eri*) is also absent. There is clearly no obi for either kimono, suggesting that the robe was meant to be worn at home (most likely on top of casual blouses and skirts), open and trailing, and flaring around the ankles. Noting these elements, it becomes evident that the only elements of the “original” kimono design that remains are the sleeves size, their rectangular format and the embroidery. Employing embroidery to create patterns is interesting to analyze, as it is an intricate technique that was already well implemented in Europe. Babani must have seen embroidery as a feature relatively easy to use to give a Japanese feel to his outfits albeit awkwardly so.

More concretely, on the purple silk crepe kimono in Figure 1, the embroidery reveals the simplification dynamic at work in the materiality of Babani’s kimono. The representation of the wisteria and peony flowers look quite weak, especially on the stem part. The

black silk and pink satin kimono (Figure 2) is in the same vein with an obvious search for poised extravagance, suggested by the bold contrast the collar and hem create with overall surface of the piece. The disposition of the embroidered cranes also gives a strong hybrid feeling with, on one hand, one of the most iconic of the Japanese birds and, on the other hand, a repetition that feels decorative without much context nor clear sense of formality, as it would be the case with kimono designed and sold in Japan.

FIGURE 1: BABANI (HOUSE OF), *KIMONO ROBE* (C.1916)



[Purple silk crepe, white, grey and black silk thread embroidery, white taffeta lining]

Source: Palais Galliera - Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris

<https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/en/node/525449#infos-principales>

FIGURE 2: BABANI (HOUSE OF), *KIMONO ROBE* (C.1930)

[Silk and satin]

Source: Palais Galliera - Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris

<https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/en/node/538720#infos-principales>

Babani's choice of embroidery showcased in the above figures may have been inspired by the numbers of imported kimono that were bearing such adornments and were seen at world fairs, private collections or with the Takashimaya "kimono for export"⁵ catalogues and import shops. But his way of using embroidered motifs once again connotes a certain carefree attitude with the technique and its meanings. The stitches, in fact, create the pattern entirely (Figures 3a and 3b), they are not just highlighting a certain part of a dyed pattern, which is usually the case with formal kimono in Japan. Furthermore, with such embroidered dress, Babani, while making new, fresh, and "modern" outfits that could be "read

⁵ See for example the piece preserved at the Kyoto Costume Institute: https://www.kci.or.jp/en/archives/digital_archives/1900s/KCI_306

like sonnets” (ZAKRESKI, 2006), was also reasserting the domestic and the demure, since embroidery, traditionally, arks to a “passive” femininity, experienced in the comfort of one’s home (PARKER, 1984). These gowns were thus not only fitting the urban Parisian taste but also supporting the paradoxes that modernity and dress reform did bring to the bodies of women—namely, freeing them from the corset but still assigning them to be inside the house. Most interestingly, when Babani was creating and implementing such embroidered, rich kimono, in Japan such garments were receding in the background, with the kimono fashion moving towards mass produced *ikat* kimono fabrics such as *kasuri* (紵) and later on *meisen* (銘仙) (KRAMER and SAVAS in JACKSON, 2020, pp.176–191).

FIGURE 3A: BABANI (HOUSE OF), *KIMONO ROBE* (C.1916)[DETAIL]



Source: Palais Galliera - Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris
<https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/en/node/525449#infos-principales>

FIGURE 3B: BABANI (HOUSE OF), *KIMONO ROBE* (C.1930)[DETAIL]

Source: Palais Galliera - Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris
<https://www.parismuseescollections.paris.fr/en/node/538720#infos-principales>

WAfrica / Lezele / Über Dandy

Compared to Babani, the orientation at work in the category of “African” kimono exposes a whole new attitude towards the Japanese iconic garment and its materiality, as the kimono is here completely preserved in its original or traditional silhouette, including the obi and the tubular, nonflaring, wrapped skirt part. The collections designed by Serge Mouangue (WAfrica),⁶ Mbugha Meni, Shimojo Mika, Morooka Mariko (Lezele),⁷ and Tia Oguri (Über Dandy Kimono)⁸ all share these strong traits. They display what could be considered the highest level of balanced hybridity as they placed the kimono transformation solely

⁶ Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/wafrica.kimono/>

⁷ Official website: <https://lezele.net>; Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/zanshinoelegance/photos>. Lezele is a brand working in collaboration with Odasho: <https://odasho.co.jp>

⁸ Official website: <https://Überdandykimono.com>; Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/Überdandykimono/?hl=en>

on the textile, illuminating the profound correspondance between Japanese dyed fabrics and the “African print”⁹ ones, such as *kanga* and wax.

As mentioned in the introduction, kimono is a form of dress that develops on a complex language with multiple networks of patterns that convey messages reflecting the Japanese appreciation of nature and culture (KIMURA, 2012 ; NITANAI, 2013, 2017; PIE INTERNATIONAL, 2013; FUJII, 2021). In other words, the surface of a kimono offers a canvas where the colors and motifs displayed achieve specific effects: the display of one’s sense of self, and a certain degree of formality. As evidenced recently with the “Imagine One World: Kimono project”¹⁰ or with the “Nishijin Tartan” design,¹¹ kimono fabrics, in their versatile nature, convey an idea of constant innovation.

The *kanga* and wax textiles used in the WAfrica, Lezele, and Über Dandy bear similar traits to its Japanese counterpart. The motifs tend to be more geometric and abstract, yet they convey a multitude of messages such as the ones connected to femininity, marital status or specific religious tenets. *Kanga* fabrics specifically bear transculturality and potent linguistic articulations, as they were formed through international trade (RESSLER, 2012), and maintain strong bounds with Swahili culture of proverbiality (BECK, 2005), almost systematically including an element of text (usually one proverb in one sentence) clearly readable on one side of the cloth and fully integrated in the printed motif.¹² Wax fabrics are equally considered for their metaphorical or symbolical meanings and practical versatility, their appeal lying in the colors, pattern size, and pattern placement (CHICHI, 2016; GROSFILLEY, 2018). All these qualities can easily be compared with kimono textiles, such as Okinawan *bingata* (紅型) fabrics (YOSHIOKA, 1993; SAMSUDDIN, 2020).

Therefore, with “African” kimono, the main design action is a textile “swap” that is simple yet smart. In other words, seeing a kimono designed with such patterned fabrics does not feel unnatural, on the contrary. It is even less incongruous when looking back at Japanese kimono designs, where such textile permutation has been present for centuries. For the

⁹ The term is put in quotation marks to signal its broad quality while acknowledging that this very denomination may be actually reductive, if not offensive, as discussed by Essel Osuanyi Quaicoo (2017, pp. 37–51).

¹⁰ Collective project originally set up for the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 and consisting of having one *furisode* kimono and one obi designed in connection with the iconography of each country participating in the Olympics. Each piece was conceptualized and created in close collaboration between dyeing and weaving studios in Japan and representatives (ambassadors, foreign residents, etc.) of the 207 designated countries. See the complete list of the designed pieces here: <https://kimono.piow.jp/kimonolist.html>

¹¹ The design is used for mostly obi fabrics and for cloth to make accessories (neckties, pouch, wallets). See for example the designs by Atelier Kyōto Nishijin: <https://atelier-nishijin.jp/products/pure-silk-nepped-jacquard-check-clasp-type-pochette-made-in-japan>. It has been officially registered in 2021 to the Scottish Register of Tartans by Noriko Yamaguchi: <https://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/tartanDetails?ref=13052>

¹² See, for example, the *kanga* from the Bard College collection on Artstor: <https://library.artstor.org/#/collection/87731955;colId=87731955;browseType=undefined;size=48> ; <https://eh.bard.edu/projects/textiles-that-talk-east-african-kangas-and-their-meanings/>

most recent examples, one can look at designers such as Jorato Saito,¹³ who uses denim or jersey in his kimono creations (CLIFFE, 2017, pp. 131–134). Yamamoto Maki, collaborating with dressmaker Ueki Yoshimi and the Palestinian NGO named The Society of Inash al Usra (Revival of the Family), recently demonstrated the same kind of approach by including Palestinian hand embroidery techniques and motifs in her obi designs (WATANABE, 2017).¹⁴ On the more “extreme” end of the spectrum, Tomoe Shinohara recently experimented with kimono tailoring using a thin layering of leather.¹⁵ Looking further back in the history of kimono reveals that in the Edo period already, foreign fabrics and their production techniques were evaluated and implemented in kimono fashion, the most prominent examples being Sarasa (更紗), batik imported from India (SATO, 1975; YOSHIOKA, 1993).

Overall, with the creations by WAfrica, Lezele, and Über Dandy Kimono, what can be noted is how the *kanga* and wax cotton fabrics are a great fit for kimono tailoring. Such fabrics even give more possibilities than the regular “loom-made” kimono fabric known as *tanmono* (反物) (usually 35.5 cm wide for 11.4 meters long). Furthermore, “African” kimono tailoring allows plenty of room for adjustments to both taste, body shapes, and sizes. One can see evidence of this sizing issue in the statement made on Über Dandy Kimono website, as part of the Amazwe yukata collection’s presentation, made in collaboration with the House of Fabrisanz brand:

African wax prints and the classic kitsuke silhouette are very versatile elements by themselves.[...] it was a conscious decision to use the two in conjunction with each other. As such, the collection can appeal to the more modern day figure and body shape, because the fabric bolt widths are able to accommodate the standard European sizing and wide variety of body proportions that can be found.¹⁶

Serge Mouangue’s *furisode* named “Night Wonders” (Figure 4), is an example where all the above-mentioned characteristics are present. It is one of his first designs and one of his most precious, being, for instance, lent to museums for exhibitions. In a 2021 YouTube video for the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg,¹⁷ Mouangue reports that he likes how he was able to achieve a balance between Japanese and West African symbols, with hues suggesting a nighttime wonderland. He also mentioned how he got inspired by Japan’s animism, which is another point of connection with his own cultural background.

¹³ Official website: <https://www.jotaro.net/fs/kimono/c/m-denim-kimono>.

¹⁴ Official website of the project here: <https://www.facebook.com/icej.tatreez/>. See also the following article: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/japan-palestine-obi-embroidery-kimono-tatreez>

¹⁵ In a project titled “Leather Scrap Kimono.” See: <https://www.tomoeshinohara.net/works/3065/>

¹⁶ See: <https://Überdandykimono.com/amazwe-afrofuturistic-kimono/>

¹⁷ See the video on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yb_oB95nuE

One can notice how the motifs' design is mixing different references, namely, Japanese *karakusa* (stylized vine motifs) placed next to repeated patterns of birds, reminiscent of both the *kanga* guinea fowl¹⁸ (the animal at the origin of *kanga* design, the dots of its plumage were known to have inspired the dots for the fabric) and the Japanese quail, with a nod made as well to the iconic *chidori* (千鳥) plover (Figure 5).

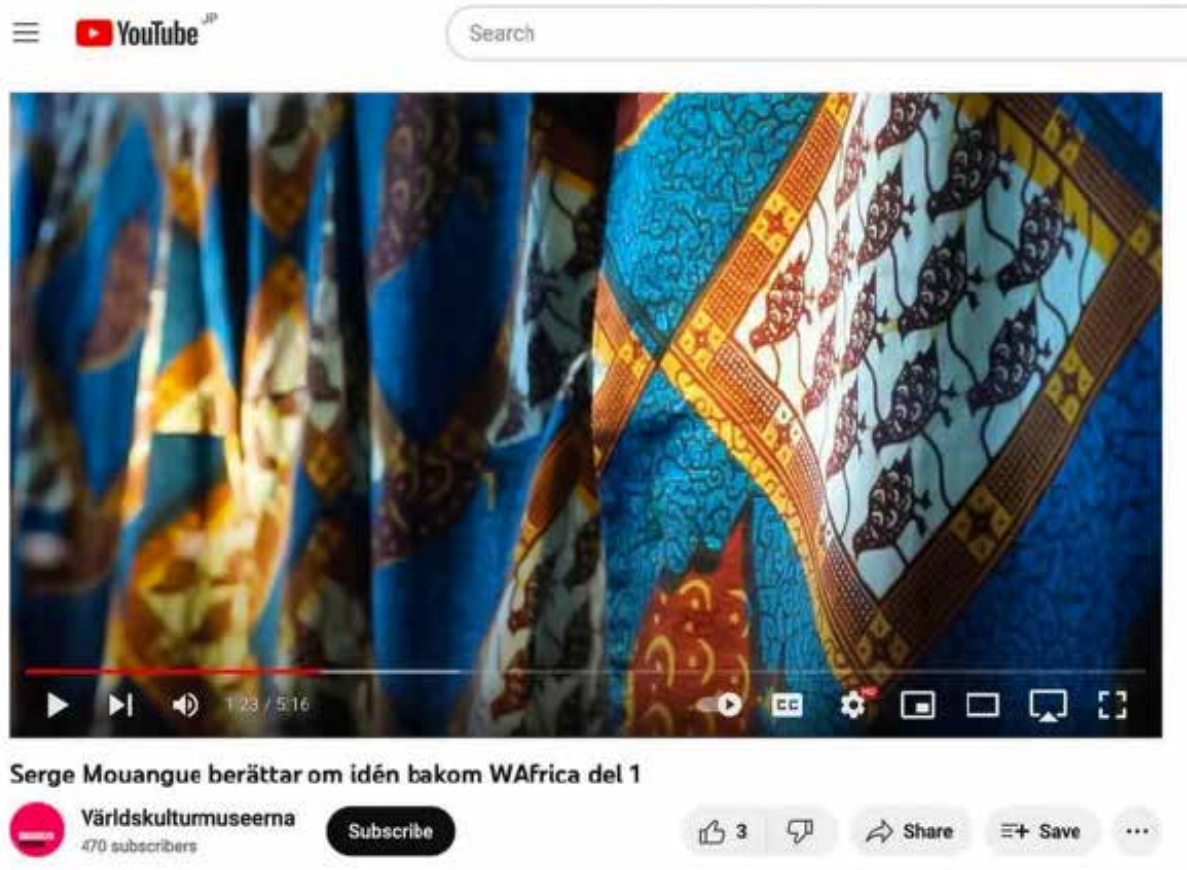
FIGURE 4: WAFRICA "NIGHT WONDERS" *FURISODE* (C.2008)



Source: VÄRLDSKULTURMUSEERNA PRESSMEDDELANDE, Apr. 15, 2021.

<https://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/varldskulturmuseerna/pressreleases/west-africa-meets-japan-in-cross-border-design-the-swedish-national-museums-of-world-culture-acquire-kimono-by-serge-mouangue-3090777>

¹⁸ Harris, Jennifer (2020) *A Companion to Textile Culture*, p. 153.

FIGURE 5: WAFRICA “NIGHT WONDER” *FURISODE* DETAIL (YOUTUBE VIDEO SCREENSHOT)

Source: VÄRLDSKULTURMUSEERNA Serge Mouangue berättar om idén bakom WAfrica del 1, Nov. 17, 2021.

On Lezele’s side, there are two particularly appealing kimono, both designed for men. They display an equilibrium of mix and match patterns: one exposes patterns of seashells paired with the Japanese traditional *seigaiha* (青海波) sea wave pattern (Figure 6, left); the other is an association of stylized flowers with the more geometric but equally “natural” *asa no ha* (麻の葉) hemp leaf pattern (Figure 6, center). The juxtaposition of both visual codes creates an appealing clash—tamed, so to speak, by the fact that the Japanese patterns are in black and white (or indigo and white) tones, while the African ones are in full color.

FIGURE 6: LEZELE KIMONO FOR MEN (2022)



Source: LEZELE Facebook post, Apr. 5, 2022

FIGURE 7: ÜBER DANDY KIMONO AMAZWE #8 WITH “YEN KAMAFO ASA” JINA PROVERB (2020)



Source: ÜBER DANDY KIMONO

<https://Überdandykimono.com/amazwe-afrofuturistic-kimono/>

With her brand Über Dandy Kimono, Tia Oguri shows her articulate search for deep material connection. In the model designed for the Collection Amazwe (Figure 7), she collaborated with House of Fabrosanz, a South Africa brand, which exposes a high level of refinement and articulation toward African history and iconography. The piece is particularly

eye catching with its vibrant play on polka dots of different sizes, nicely supported by a *jina* proverb that reads “Yen Kamafo Asa”.

Yūzen Sari

The designers behind the Kyōto Yūzen Sari project¹⁹ take a completely different approach than the above examples, as their direction is more about “exporting” one particular kimono technique and applying it to the flowy Indian sari. This project is similar to the Kyōto-based Pagong (Kamedatomi) brand with their series of Hawaiian / Aloha shirts and Western-style dresses printed using the traditional Kata-Yūzen (型友禪) process (HALL, 2015, 2020)²⁰ or Tomihiro Yūzen turning towards the designing of fabrics for bags with their Ritofu branch.²¹ The prime idea with Yūzen sari is detaching the technique from the original garment and through this, attempt to make the technique survive economically and culturally (ONUKI, 2022).

Kimono designers looking into sari for such “crisis solution” creates another rich platform for material dialogues, displaying how sari fashion shares many similarities with kimono: it is a “national” dress that consolidated its grammar, physical parameters, and loci through the friction with Westernization, as well as practical clothes (such as *salwar kameez*) (BAHL, 2005; KHAIRE, 2011); it has a high level of adornment, with special attention given to the texture of the weaving and the unity or opposition aspects its embroidered patterns create (KAWLRA, 2005). Another point of similarity with kimono is that the sari, with its long history, undeniably connects to class, urban taste and femininity, it can also be “dialed-up” and become an expensive outfit akin to an artwork. As highlighted by Bahl Vinay: “The *sari* [...] has become a functional, heady mix of sex appeal, feminine mystery, elegance, individuality and adaptability [...] *Sari* is the garment of the past with limitless possibilities for the future” (2005, p. 105). Like kimono, sari production can also be associated with specific localities, which bring their own set of qualities and aesthetic. For example, the Banarasi saris made in the holy Hindu city and pilgrimage site of Banaras, or Varanasi, are considered to be the best for ceremonial wear (SHUHKLA, 2005, 2008) and could be compared to the high-quality, formal kimono produced in Kyoto. A final similarity is that both kimono and sari have inspired Western fashion designers such as Yves Saint Laurent or Christian Dior, as evidenced in the exhibitions *Kimono: Kyoto to Catwalk* (2020)²² and *India in Fashion: The Impact of Indian Dress and Textiles on the Fashionable Imagination* (2023).²³

¹⁹ Official website: <https://www.KyotoYuzensari.art>

²⁰ See also the official website of the brand: <https://pagong.jp/en/>

²¹ An idea parallel to the “Nishijin Tartan” one mentioned earlier. See the official Ritofu website: <https://shop.japanobjects.com/pages/about-ritofu>

²² This exhibition was held originally at the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) in 2020. As of year 2023, it has traveled to Sweden (Museum of World Culture, Gothenburg), France (Musée du Quai Brandy, Paris) and Switzerland (Rietberg Museum, Zurich).

²³ Held at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre, Mumbai from April 2 to June 4, 2023. See: <https://fashionunited.uk/news/culture/a-feast-for-the-senses-india-in-fashion-exhibition-at-nmacc-mumbai/2023051269548>

In concrete terms, as one NHK Newline video reports,²⁴ applying the Japanese Yūzen technique to sari opens new perspectives for designing them, as it makes them lighter, as the technique uses thinner silk and does not have much embroidery, a feature that indeed adds weight in traditional sari design. The same video also highlights how designing and painting patterns using Kyō-Yūzen process on sari was challenging to the craftsmen because sari fabric is larger than regular kimono: in fact, the sari represents a surface of 1.2 meters wide instead of the usual 35.5cm width of a regular *tanmono* kimono bolt of fabric. This way the sari calls for a different pace in design and production, as the placement of the patterns is different, and it requires bigger drawings (by a factor of about three).

Among the models on sale, two are particularly striking. The first one (Figure 8 A, B, C) is a sari with a “landscape” motif of bamboo and sparrows, similar to scroll paintings by the Maruyama school. It also has an edge dyed with a deep purple color, adorned with golden waves, reminiscent of the Rinpa school of painting. The whole composition is in par with some of the landscape kimono that have been designed since the Edo period and marking the birth of hand painting on silk.

FIGURE 8A: STUDIO SANKŌ SENKŌ 三興染工 YŪZEN SARI WITH MOTIF OF SPARROWS AND BAMBOO (OVERALL VIEW)



Source: Photograph by the author during a special display at Kyocera Museum, Kyōto, Oct. 15, 2022.

²⁴ NHK World TV - Newline Biz / Newline in Depth program (2022/03/14 and 2022/05/05) See clips on Internet Archive: https://archive.org/details/LINKTV_20220505_120000_Newline/start/960/end/1020 (marked at 5:16 am)

FIGURE 8B: STUDIO SANKŌ SENKŌ 三興染工 YŪZEN SARI WITH MOTIF OF SPARROWS AND BAMBOO (DETAIL BORDER)



Source: Photograph by the author during a special display at Kyocera Museum, Kyōto, Oct. 15, 2022.

FIGURE 8C: STUDIO SANKŌ SENKŌ 三興染工 YŪZEN SARI WITH MOTIF OF SPARROWS AND BAMBOO (DETAIL BIRD AND BAMBOO)



Source: Photograph by the author during a special display at Kyocera Museum, Kyōto, Oct. 15, 2022.

The second example (Figure 8 D, E, F) is a sari with *sakura* cherry blossom and *yukinowa* snowflake motifs, the petals and the snowflakes edges highlighted with gold. Both creations bring further evidence of the natural connections between kimono and sari design, demonstrating that Japanese drawing and dyeing skills can be “exported” onto different surfaces without major technical troubles and the aesthetical effect also doesn’t suffer from the “transfer.” The Japanese feel and stylization of the patterns is remarkable although there are concerns on how to market these pieces. Looking again at the textile material used for sari, where the quality is determined through the weaving and the embroidery, one can deduce that *Yūzen* sari, while appealing visually with the lightness they bring, can be actually hard to sell. They are indeed executed with the greatest care and the utmost level of skill, applying the purest colors to the nicest *rinzu* silk, but these saris might encounter some issues upon selling because they are indeed just dyed and not embroidered. To the eyes of Indian women, having a piece that is only dyed fabric sold at such a high price makes it more difficult to consider, as to them, simply dyeing a piece of fabric cannot justify the high cost.

FIGURE 8D: STUDIO MARUEI SENSHŌ 丸榮染匠 YŪZEN SARI WITH MOTIF OF STYLIZED SNOWFLAKES AND CHERRY BLOSSOMS (OVERALL VIEW)



Source: Photograph by the author during a special display at Kyocera Museum, Kyōto, Oct. 15, 2022.

FIGURE 8E: STUDIO MARUEI SENSHŌ 丸栄染匠 YŪZEN SARI WITH MOTIF OF STYLIZED SNOWFLAKES AND CHERRY BLOSSOMS (CLOSE-UP VIEW)



Source: Photograph by the author during a special display at Kyocera Museum, Kyōto, Oct. 15, 2022.

FIGURE 8F: STUDIO MARUEI SENSHŌ 丸栄染匠 YŪZEN SARI WITH MOTIF OF STYLIZED SNOWFLAKES AND CHERRY BLOSSOMS (DETAILED)



Source: Photograph by the author during a special display at Kyocera Museum, Kyōto, Oct. 15, 2022.

Comparing the three “categories” of examples presented above on a more conceptual level, it becomes evident that they juxtapose different kinds of material, within a specific time and space that makes kimono fashion resonate with textiles and silhouettes anchored outside Japan. In this way, they propose a rich sort of intersections, highlighting new angles on what bricolage is and what bricolage means. As conceptualized by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who positions bricoleurs as makers who cleverly puts themselves in trouble with the materials that they want to put together, bricolage means a creative process that intersect materials and give them new relevance, igniting new usage:

The bricoleur ‘speaks’ not only *with* things but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life but the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. [...] The bricoleur is creating structures by means of events. [...] the materials of the bricoleur, are elements which can be defined by two criteria: they have *had a use* [...] and *they can be used again* either for the same purpose or for a different one if they are at all diverted from their previous function. (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1966 [1962], pp. 21–35)

The concept of bricolage helps illuminate the nuances Babani, WAfrica, Lezele, Über Dandy Kimono, and Yūzen-sari outfits create and confront. With bricolage in mind, it becomes evident that if these non-Japanese designers explore fashion with kimono—using its entirety or just a fragment—it is to say something about the state of fashion in general. Their

research seeks to bring material solutions to an industry that tends to get standardized, infusing through cuts, folds, and fibers an element of personal taste and personal mythology. While animated by the desire to see beyond borders, these designs consolidate their foreign encounters and make them visible. They do so not to impose new production patterns to be copied everywhere nor invite new global outreach but foster the fact that local designers can make their customers dream with exciting new “fabrication” sites, with kimono that gives more than just an “oriented” allure.

On this latter point, it is interesting to see how each brand has established communication with their niche clientele (and their rhetorical communities) and how the imagery of every finished piece is curated to fit specific forms of media, as analyzed below.

From create to curate, the brands “rendezvous” with the medias

Fashion, ever since the 1890s and the first issues of *Vogue*, has relied on media diffusion to assert trends and the media undeniably condition the way designs, designers’ names, and brands circulate (COLUCCI, 2021). In other words, mediatization is part of fashion *praxis*, creating visuals that arks to the material, and vice-versa, in a dynamic manner. As phrased by Agnès Rocamora:

Looking at mediatization in the field of fashion means looking at the ways practices of fashion – practices of production, consumption, distribution and diffusion – are articulated through the media, and, more crucially, are dependent on the media for their articulation. The interest is not on the idea of communicating fashion through the media but on doing fashion through the media. Investigating the mediatization of fashion then, means looking at the ways fashion practices have adapted to, and been transformed by, the media. (ROCAMORA, 2016, n.p.)

Babani’s stories

The mediatization of Babani’s kimono was done mostly via photographs published in fashion magazines. The impact of these pictures was important as the magazines where in large format and because each image portrayed a famous actress dressed in Babani’s creations. The series published in *Le Figaro - Modes* in 1905²⁵ are particularly striking. The March 1905 issue gives, for instance, a full view of a Babani kimono, donned by Maud Amy, who happened to be starring in a Japonisme Vaudeville comedy play titled *Princesses d’Amour*. Her silhouette is more reminiscent of a long, trailing dress than the usual kimono draped in cylindrical “willow hips” deportment. There is no proper obi in view either—the placement of the iris motifs and their size seem to have been executed with a certain simplicity and naïveté (as mentioned above with the embroidery on Figure 1 and 2). The overall presentation is nicely controlled and groomed to convey a Japanese allure (Figure 9 A). The same codification of the body and kimono can be found in the portraits of Miss Jane Labatoux and Miss Georgette Sandry,

²⁵ Online scanned version available on the National French Library (BnF) website: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb387350355/date1905>

respectively, in the May and July issues in the same year, with an intriguing twist, as they are in fact donning the same kimono, sitting on the same chair in a very similar interior studio environment (Figures 9 B and C).

FIGURE 9A: "KIMONO FROM THE HOUSE OF BABANI" PHOTO PORTRAIT OF MISS MAUD AMY



Source: LE FIGARO MODES - March 1905 issue, p.18
 (Available on the French National Library (BnF) Gallica website)

FIGURE 9B: "INTERIOR ROBE FROM THE HOUSE OF BABANI" PHOTO PORTRAIT OF MISS JANE LABATOUX



Source: LE FIGARO MODES - May 1905 issue, p.18
(Available on the French National Library (BnF) Gallica website)

FIGURE 9C: "JAPANESE INTERIOR DRESS FROM THE HOUSE OF BABANI"
PHOTO PORTRAIT OF MISS GEORGETTE SANDRY



Source: LE FIGARO MODES - June 1905 issue, n.p
 (Available on the French National Library (BnF) Gallica website)

Looking at these three pages together, the description of the garment is almost identical, indicating that what is presented is a “Kimono” or a “Japanese Interior robes from the house of Babani.” To supplement the factual captions, handwritten dedications, directly addressed to Babani, are reproduced below the pictures. They are all done in the same tone, praising the different qualities the models experience when dressed in Babani’s kimono. Miss Amy formulates her praise as follows: “The best compliment I could express towards these delicious robes is that I can’t see myself don anything else” (Figure 9A). Miss Labatoux phrases her praise in a similar fashion: “Refined, supple, elegant and lightweight, it is the dream of

interior dresses. I always leave it with regret, that says how much I love it!” (Figure 9B). Miss Sandry’s comment appeals the readers (and potential customers) with a more general and stylish remark: “Draped in your Japanese robe, any svelte woman can feel at ease. And to make one’s contours show nicely, there is no better adornments than this” (Figure 9C).

These words of praise, most interestingly, resonate with columns titled “Echos de Paris et d’Ailleurs,” located on the pages after the photograph, commenting on Babani’s affairs in different ways. On page 19 of the March 15, 1905, issue, there is a brief comment on how many women rush to Babani’s store (located on the chic Boulevard Haussmann) to buy robes with “dedicated nuances that outline the women’s curves while leaving room for movement.” On the same page, another column confirms that Babani’s shop is very busy, attracting Parisian ladies and actresses altogether, with a note that the designer had just come back from Japan and secured a collaboration with Japanese embroiderers. In the July 15, 1905, issue one can find the most eloquent textual piece about Babani’s creative process and business model. It not only describes how Babani had found ladies in Kyōto to work for him but also illustrates said fact with pictures of—allegedly—the ladies themselves (Figure 10A). The whole page calls for a discussion on veracity, as the pictures are clearly not from Babani’s studio in Kyōto, as the captions claim, but are more likely from Kusakabe Kimbei’s albums (Figures 10B and C).

FIGURE 10A: “ECHOS DE PARIS ET D’AILLEURS” COLUMN PAGE DESCRIBING THE BABANI STUDIOS IN KYŌTO



Source: LE FIGARO MODES - July 1905 issue, p.19

(Available on the French National Library (BnF) Gallica website)

FIGURE 10B: KUSAKABE KIMBEI, STUDIO PHOTOGRAPH OF A SEAMSTRESS (#392: GIRL SEWING) (C.1898)



Source: http://www.baxleystamps.com/litho/meiji/1898080967/album_1_18-1.jpg

FIGURE 10C: KUSAKABE KIMBEI, STUDIO PHOTOGRAPH OF A COUPLE OF SEAMSTRESSES (#1736: SEWING) (C.1898)



Source: <https://www.cnn.co.jp/photo/35119816-5.html>

Looking at these magazine pages, what is transmitted with the way Babani's "Parisian" kimono are mediatized is the desire to bring something authentically Japanese to the French capital and the fashionable ladies living there. These women were artistically inclined; they were mostly actresses, socialites, and wealthy ladies, such as the Duchess of Maillé.²⁶ By buying his kimono, they could prove they were "emancipated ladies and artists who appreciated the originality of Babani's creations and the freedom of movement these allow" (PALAIS GALLIERA and GROSSIORD, 2017, p. 208).

Through this kind of purchase, they were also embracing what the matter of dreams and fantasy are made of, as Terry Satsuki Milhaupt observed:

The kimono, whether as a souvenir or collectible object, was a referent to Japan as imagined by its owner, not as lived within a Japanese context.[...] The kimono's owner could project onto this garment his or her longing for a Japan that was "traditional", exotic, unchanging or whatever image suited his or her fancy, regardless of the kimono's function and symbolism within Japan. (MILHAUPT, 2014, pp. 158-159)

A dreamlike attitude that nourished the formation of a definite modern taste. As observed by Estelle Niklès Van Osselt:

These ladies, who dreamed of far-off lands, embarked on ventures whose results were apparent in their dress, their readings and their homes. Clearly, tracking down a rare piece, whether made of fabric or a precious material, one that stands out from the others, was a necessity for the modern woman in the process of designing a new life for herself. (VAN OSSELT, 2019, p. 46)

In the end, what Babani has brought to fashion is not only garments but a whole new attitude toward exclusivity and shopping for the uncommon because it is exotic and savvy. Compared to the other examples below, Babani appears as an early trend setter, using cleverly the power of images and discourse, letting the pictures speak for themselves, the words the models would write and the columns the magazines would publish asserting the qualities of his designs as convincingly as possible.

WAfrica, Lezele and Über Dandy's messages

Looking into WAfrica's and Serge Mouangue's online and media presence, the first striking aspect is that it does not use a wide variety of social media platforms, as one would expect of a 21st-century brand²⁷— it just has an official Facebook page.²⁸ Most interestingly,

²⁶ to whom was sold a black and white kimono (See scanned invoice, dated 1922: <https://www.diktats.com/en/products/facture-de-la-maison-babani-98-boulevard-haussmann-a-paris-1922>)

²⁷ As mentioned by the designer himself in this interview here: <https://www.okayafrika.com/in-conversation-with-serge-mouangue/>

²⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/wafrica.kimono/>

it is the museum and curation world that seems to represent WAfrica's most active media platform, with for instance a video talk for the Swedish Museum of World Culture, which is set to acquire one of WAfrica's «Night Wonders» piece in their collection (Figure 4). The same piece can be found showcased in the main communication material for the temporary “Oh You Fancy” 2018–19 exhibition at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit (Figure 11). Besides imagery, which seems to always loop back to the “Night Wonders” creation, Mouangue also takes upon the museums', newspapers', and magazines' media outlets to explain his story, his take on design in general and tell his audience about what led him to consider kimono, as he is originally from Cameroon. In a 2009 interview for *Kateigaho International Edition* (Vol. 24), he stated:

As I was looking at iconic Japanese features, I came across the kimono very quickly because that's one of the strongest iconic symbols of this culture. I then [...] saw that African fabric is iconic of Africa. So I decided to superimpose these two icons and change the kimono using African fabric. [...] Design is about telling a story. To have a good story you have to have a bit of ambiguity. When you built a story between two cultures and put them side by side, respecting both cultures and their values, then you create a “third story” a way to touch every human mind. (MOUANGUE, 2009, n.p.)

FIGURE 11: “OH YOU FANCY” EXHIBITION ANNOUNCEMENT

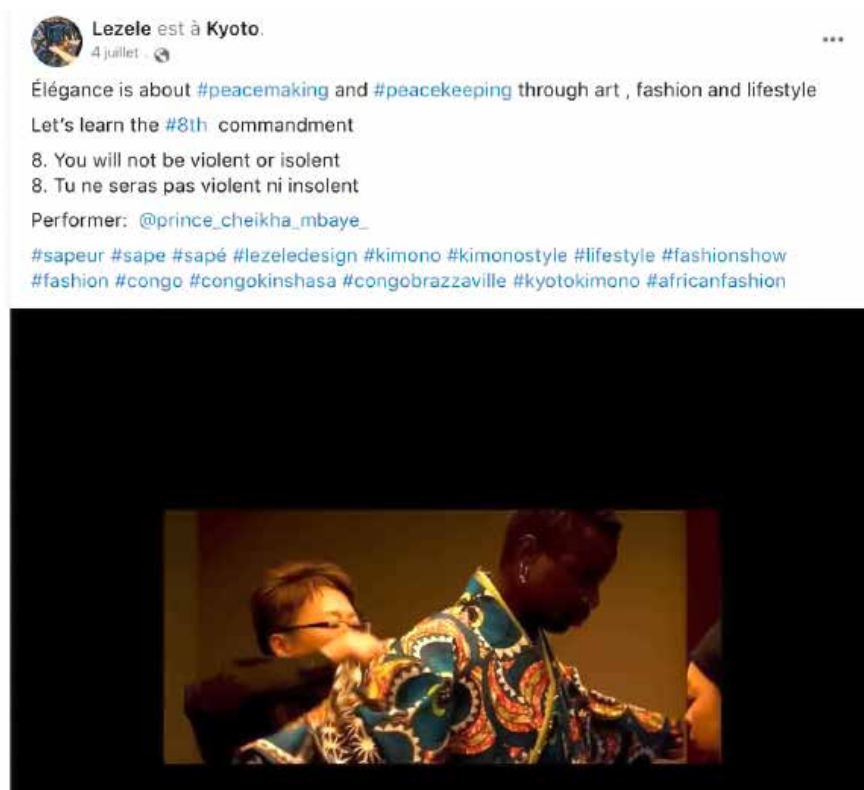


Source: BLAC ONLINE MAGAZINE, Jul. 1st, 2018

<https://www.blac.media/arts-culture/oh-you-fancy-black-hair-fashion-exhibit-opens-at-the-wright/>

In Lezele’s case, media outreach is slightly more visible, with an official website²⁹ and publicity through the communication around the “Afrika Meets Kansai” events, in which Lezele participates regularly. Looking at the pictures and specifically the caption and hashtags attached to them (Figure 12), it becomes clear that as a brand, Lezele wants to mesh the aesthetic of the African *sapeurs* with kimono, bringing a colorful playfulness, a certain taken on elegance, as well as a touch of “insolent yet non violent” disruption. The latter tenet is one “commandment” at the base of *la sape*, the movement the *sapeurs* fiercely advocate.

FIGURE 12: SCREENSHOT OF LEZELE’S FACEBOOK PAGE WITH HASHTAGS AND CAPTION INDICATING THE *SAPEUR* INFLUENCE



Source: LEZELE, Facebook post, Jul. 4th, 2022.

Intersecting the dandy-like and “disruptive” attitude, the *sapeurs* dressing in kimono develop rich narratives, wittily conjugating power and adornment (GONDOLA, 1999; BRODIN, 2016; LIN, 2019). As phrased by Benedetta Morsiani:

The socio-cultural phenomenon of *la sape* represents a well-established Congolese fashion and lifestyle practice. Its members, defined as *sapeurs*, are mainly composed of lower-class Congolese men living in both Congo-Brazzaville (RC, former French colony) and Congo-Kinshasa (DRC) and among its European diasporas.

²⁹ <https://lezele.net>

Sape derives from the French verb *se saper*, which in French conveys the idea of ostentatious dressing habits. Sape is, therefore, a word play used as an acronym standing for Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes. Sapeurs are known for fashioning their identities through the acquisition and reinterpretation of Western designer labels, typically using spectacular luxury clothing inspired by the classical elegance of the Western suit. A typical sapeur look consists of haute couture garments which are purposely assembled to assert extreme fashionability. This usually includes suits and ties, pocket squares and alligator shoes, ostentatious watches, sunglasses, and other accessories. Although la sape sartorial style is based on Western designs, analogous to that of European dandies, and is rooted in African colonial histories, it has often been interpreted as a means to express modern Central African identities. (MORSIANI, 2021, pp. 9–10)

As for Über Dandy Kimono, the mediatization of the brand is one of the strongest compared to WAfrica and Lezele, with a very active Instagram account³⁰ and an official website,³¹ and their collections are put on sale regularly. The communication around each collection, as seen above, is also very articulate, heralded with the keyword freedom. As phrased in the presentation text for the Nyoni 2020 collection:

This collection has been designed [with] the concept of being creatively free. Furthermore, to increase emphasis on the thread of freedom, the collection is titled Nyoni which means bird in several Bantu languages. Through the Spring collection, we are shown how UDK wishes to be free creatively at the same time as the application of traditional and modern styling.³²

The search for freedom showcased by Über Dandy Kimono designer Tia Oguri is akin to the *sapeur* aesthetic promoted by Mbugha Meni and the “third story” evoked by Mouangue. The way she talks about it resonates with the other two “African” designers deeply, showing that in the end, researching through kimono fashion is not only a bricolage of textiles but also of personal histories, travels marked by diaspora, the use of different languages, and a sense of fracture all the while maintaining an acute understanding of Japanese culture and *kitsuke* (着付け), the rules of dressing in kimono properly. Looking at all three “African” examples together, the way they advertise their works reasserts how kimono designs can become thought-provoking statements, interlocking the wild, the tamed, the wrapped, and the tailored altogether.

³⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/Überdandykimono/?hl=en>

³¹ <https://Überdandykimono.com>

³² <https://Überdandykimono.com/nyoni-futuristic-kimono/>

Kyō-Yūzen sari's ambassadors

The orientation demonstrated by the Kyō-Yūzen project designers is rooted on the opposite end of what “African” and “Parisian” kimono designs establish, with the applications of a specific kimono dyeing technique onto a foreign form of dress, the Indian sari. The media platforms that report and advertise the project are varied, with an official page and newspaper articles and videos.

In whichever format, the features of the Yūzen Sari design that are highlighted the most are the artistry, through the “wearable art” keyword. The diplomatic dimensions the whole project represents for Japanese and Indian governmental offices are also heavily highlighted, as evidenced with the pictures from the Indian embassy in Japan, which were posted on Twitter (Figure 13), and the consequent report.³³

FIGURE 13: AMBASSADOR SANJAY KUMAR VERMA AND HIS SPOUSE, WITH OFFICIALS OF @INDIANEMBTKYO VISITED KYŌTO YŪZEN SILK SAREE EXHIBITION IN TOKYO.



Source: INDIA IN JAPAN - Twitter, Jan. 9th, 2022.

Parallel to this diplomatic route, the cultural ambassador of the project, Ms. Sophie Junko Kakizaki, uses several media outlets to offer her own personal perception of the product. She enjoys dressing in Yūzen Sari (Figure 14) and through her different accounts, reveals a very sensory approach. For instance, she explains how flowy a sari is and how it

³³ https://www.indembassy-tokyo.gov.in/public_files/assets/pdf/Newsletter_January_2022.pdf

makes her interrogate the way a kimono wraps one's silhouette in return. As she phrased in the article for the *Kimono* online magazine, in August 2022:

The sari that I wore that was made in Kyōto became like a cultural bridge between India and Japan. It was a thing of beauty that successfully coexisted between the two cultures. I was hesitant at first about how people would see me as a Japanese woman wearing the traditional attire of the Indian subcontinent. When I mentioned my concern to Naoki Takizawa, a leading Japanese fashion designer and I am advised about the Kyōto Yūzen Sari project, he said, "Junko, wear the sari with your own DNA. What is important is the whole picture; whether you are dressed in a kimono, western clothes, or sari, your essence never changes. Your clothing is simply an expression of your spirit." I was deeply impressed by Naoki Takizawa's words as my good friend. I realized that it is not necessary to assert my Japanese identity too much, but to be flexible and to respect Indian culture by adorning myself with the beauty of sari and wholeheartedly enjoying the many facets of Indian culture. I realized that this is the true nature of what "charm" means.³⁴

FIGURE 14: JUNKO SOPHIE KAKIZAKI DRESSED IN YŪZEN SARI
POSING IN FRONT OF THE YASAKA PAGODA IN KYŌTO



Source: <https://www.kyotoYuzensari.art/our-ambassador>

³⁴ <https://www.kimonoichiba.com/media/column/760/>

Interestingly, the way Kakizaki reports her experience of sari is not far from the ones the actresses modeling for Babani. With an accent on how the fabric and the wrapping “flows” around one’s silhouette, it can be argued that both “Parisian” kimono and “Yūzen” sari, while exploring different paths and coming from different time periods, share similarities in the idea of freeing the expression of femininity and playing with our perception of what is conservative in fashion and what is creative. Drawing such parallel also help bring the concept of art in the center of each bricolage operations: the art of embroidery and tailoring for Babani’s kimono, the art of dyeing, drawing and wrapping for the Yūzen sari.

Including the “African” kimono examples to these two reveal that through media, the audience has the opportunity to not only think about the material but the image and the message they convey. All outfits presented are indeed projecting a well-constructed image, which may only attract a small “niche” clientele but even if the creations do not sell widely, they made their points about how fashion design is in the end a matter of negotiating agency between the personal and the social, the political and the diplomatic—between the reality of current fast fashion situations and the hopes waiting to materialize for a better, slow fashion world.

Conclusion

Analyzing and comparing how the kimono is considered in its material and mediated tendencies highlights the issue of offer and demand as well as authenticity, with all designers united by the desire to reach (or respond to) specific communities—modern Parisian ladies, postcolonial African *sapeurs*, 21st-century Indian women—or appeal to anyone with an eye for creative hybridity.

Considering again the bricolaged materiality of the outfits, it can be concluded that their relevance in terms of fashionability and beauty relies on the very fact that they sustain a constant state of ambiguity. The above discussed “Japonisme”, “African” kimono, as well as the Yūzen sari create a vibrant platform for deeper thought on the locality of dress and for future transnational dressing habits too. By disrupting the way garments are usually made, and the way gender and ethnicity are assigned to outfits, these designs alter our basic perception of adornment and body. Meanwhile, they reinject symbolic and rooted meanings into fashion design, precisely when fashion is at a dead-end: Babani is asserting new avenues for early 20th century fashion-oriented elite in search for alternatives to the corset; WAfrica, Lezele, and Über Dandy and Yūzen sari are proposing provocative yet delicate forms of dressing to 21st-century well-connected customers in search for more inclusive, rooted, and sustainable garments.

On another level, these kimono designs can be seen as gestures which cleverly tackle the issues of cultural appropriation and social Darwinism (KAWAMURA, 2022, pp. 57–58) by “weaving” together Parisian, African, and Indian taste with kimono. As Richard Martin and Harold Koda have so eloquently captured:

Dress [has been] one of the art forms most susceptible to new knowledge and expanded horizons, it has accommodated a changing world. Thus, clothing is predisposed to tell us something of our conventions and inventions, our inhibitions and ambitions. The vista of the East has altered Western life and dress. The world view of East and West reconciled in mutuality. (MARTIN and KODA, 1994, pp. 11-12)

What is thus confirmed through these remarks is that kimono is not a mere periphery but rather one of the most efficient centers of the fashion world: it is not immutable, not sacred, it can easily connect with other textiles, other techniques and encompass many variations, from casual to formal. Kimono in these examples thus way encourages further study of fashion in Japonisme, Parisian, African, and Indian spheres. The bricolaged and mediatized examples presented in this article can also lead us to think more thoroughly about the way clothes can impact society, a dynamic exposed by Giorgio Riello (2011), as well as Kaori O'Connor:

“Cloth and clothing mean to materialize social and political statuses, convey and consolidate identity, mediate social relations and not only reflect social change but create it, acting as [...] an agent of history by giving cultural form to innovative dynamic moments.” (O'CONNOR In KÜCHLER, 2005, p.41).

The social component in fashion is effectively one of its most potent, connecting clothes to claims, negotiating agency and change, as Mina Roces phrased: “experiences of empowerment [may be] ephemeral but the activists have learned how to express their agency through sartorial change.” (2022, p. 10).

Ultimately, all these kimono references, while they help interrogate our rapport towards the conception and consumption of fashion, also highlight the importance of the stories and narratives we tell with clothes. As phrased by Adriano D'Aloia:

Fashion has a pivotal role in the creative media industry as a provider of material fundamental for the formation of imaginary worlds. Fashion tells stories (what is more, these are serial stories 'scheduled' in *seasons*), and as a storyteller it activates a number of dynamics, ranging from character creation to audience identification processes, from strategies of *mise-en-scène* to narratological composition and plot development, from aesthetic construction of communication style to the use of photographic codes and techniques. Moreover, as a creative industry and medium of entertainment, fashion shares with media [...] the exhibition of its spectacular products to large-scale audiences. (D'ALOIA, 2017, p.4)

These designs, one from the height of Japonisme a hundred years ago and the other two from our contemporary 21st century, interpellate with their display of technique and with the narrative they create. Made of intertwined cultures and languages, they demonstrate a desire for a society that is trying to think beyond borders and imagine a world where the weft and warp, colors and patterns, folds and shapes of things designed create not an utopian tangle but new cardinal points to navigate the conception, production and consumption of the ever moving game of fibers, fantasy and (dis)orientations that we call fashion.

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