

“The Models for Africa”

Accra’s Independence-Era Fashion Culture and the Creations of Chez Julie

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On January 14, 1961, a fashionably dressed young Ghanaian woman was photographed arriving at the Accra airport (Fig. 1). The accompanying headline, “Julie—The Girl from Paris,” announced the return of “twenty-eight year old Juliana Norteye, a recent graduate in fashion and dressmaking from the Ecole Guerre-Lavigne in Paris, France” (“Julie” 1961:8). Norteye, later known by her designer label “Chez Julie,” became Ghana’s first professionally trained, post-independence fashion designer.¹ Her stylish garments captivated fashion-conscious Ghanaians from the late 1950s until her death in 1993. Throughout her career, Chez Julie reimagined historical forms of dress, fusing local styles and fabrics with globally recognizable trends to create fashionable garments that appealed to Accra’s cosmopolitan elite by encapsulating their global, yet decidedly local identities. Her designs encouraged the continuation of local dress practices, albeit in revised and often unexpected forms, becoming eye-catching garments that reflected the nationalist ideologies fostered by Nkrumah during the post-independence period.

This article will begin by documenting the complex and vibrant fashion culture of Accra during the 1950s and 1960s, a largely unexplored yet critical time for the revision and expansion of Ghana’s visual culture. The dynamism of the independence era and its emphasis on experimental and cross-cultural fashions primed the runway for the introduction of Chez Julie. A summation of Chez Julie’s career and an analysis of her sartorial contributions to Accra’s post-independence culture will illustrate her importance as a fashion designer and innovator of Ghanaian dress practices. The interconnectedness of Chez Julie’s garments to specific political ideologies, their ability to challenge gender roles, and their encapsulation of a nationalist and cos-

mopolitan Ghanaian identity will demonstrate the potency of fashion as a form of African artistic expression, continuing the movement led by scholars such as Victoria Rovine, Suzanne Gott, and Karen Hansen, to incorporate fashion designers and specific forms of fashion into the canon of African art history.

The majority of historical information for this article was collected through extensive research at the archives of Ghana’s national newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, which holds physical copies of both the *Daily Graphic* and the *Sunday Mirror* newspapers from their inception through the present day.² Due to both periodicals’ focus on the activities of Accra, and particularly the *Sunday Mirror*’s extensive documentation of Accra’s elite citizenry and popular culture, these periodicals provide a rich and critically important account of Accra’s mid-twentieth century fashions. Information regarding Chez Julie’s career was initially gleaned from interviews with her family, primarily her sister Edith François and her daughter Brigitte Naa-Ode Kragbé. François wore her sister’s fashions throughout her life and actively documented her sister’s designs as part of a larger photographic project on the historical and contemporary dress practices of Ghana. Although I readily acknowledge the potential biases of familial recollections, the majority of François’s and Kragbé’s memories are supported by archival findings, and together allow for a more nuanced, complex, and personal recreation of the career and legacy of Chez Julie.

DEFINING THE FICKLE: AN EXPLORATION OF FASHION

In order to fully engage with a discussion on the significance of Ghanaian fashion, it is necessary to explicate several concepts that are fundamental to understanding Accra’s fashion culture, the most important of which is fashion itself. Fashion is an essential, yet limited, subcategory of dress. Dress, as defined



1 A fashionably attired Chez Julie returning from Paris in 1961, featured in “Julie: The Girl from Paris,” the *Daily Graphic*.
Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the *Daily Graphic* archive

2 Emily Asiedu wearing a *kaba* that includes all three pieces: a tailored blouse, skirt, and a wrapper draped over the left arm, 2014.
Photo: Christopher Richards.



by Joanne Eicher, is “visual as well as other sensory modifications (taste, smell, sound, and feel) and supplements (garments, jewelry, and accessories) to the body” (Eicher 1995:1). Fashion is often narrowly defined as a Western phenomenon linked to the rise of capitalism in Europe and America (Allman 2004, Steele 2010); however, several scholars (Allman 2004; Gott and Loughran 2010; Roces and Edwards 2007; Rovine 2001, 2010; Steele 1998, 2010; Hansen and Madison 2013) have challenged this description of fashion, inspiring my own conception of the term. I define fashion as a form of dress frequently associated with elite status in a given culture, which embodies change through the innovation of existing and historically significant materials and styles of dress. Fashion is also an inherently cross-cultural phenomenon. Fashion designers continually look beyond the confines of their own localities for creative inspiration in the hopes of designing original and avant-garde garments that blend global styles, materials, and dress practices with familiar and established elements of their respective dress systems. An inclusive definition of fashion does not preclude the existence of additional categories within the field.

This article focuses specifically on designer fashions: garments created by known and recognized individuals who champion innovation and whose creations are often associated with elite status. Designer fashions can include garments created specifically for runway shows and garments sold in boutiques that are part of seasonal collections. Designer fashion garments are also synonymous with their creator. In many instances, the knowledge and ability to recognize that a garment was created by a specific designer is more important than the individual artistry or quality of the garment itself. Designer fashions are distinct

from the more widely recognized category of haute couture fashion; haute couture emphasizes garments that are meticulously crafted by hand, with an emphasis on expensive materials, detailed and complex construction, and elaborate embellishments (Saillard and Zazzo 2012). The materials used for designer fashions are not always expensive, nor are they subjected to the same exacting precision of haute couture. In the context of Ghana, designer fashions must be further distinguished from the custom-made garments of seamstresses and tailors and imported clothing, as both are accessible to a broad population of Ghanaians and are not typically associated with elite status.

In a pre-independence context, the fashion trends of Accra can be broadly categorized with three terms: world fashions (Eicher and Sumberg 1995), local fashions, and international fashions. World fashions are styles of dress unfettered by geographic and ethnic limitations, particularly Western-centric fashions that have been readily adopted by people from around the world (Eicher and Sumberg 1995). Local, distinctly Ghanaian fashions are amalgamations of global and local styles rooted in a historical past that have become synonymous with established traditions of Ghanaian dress. The most notable of Ghana’s local fashions is the *kaba*, a garment created from six yards of fabric that includes a tailored blouse, a sewn or wrapped skirt, and an additional piece of fabric for a wrapper or shawl (Richards 2015) (Fig. 2). The earliest documentation of the *kaba* can be traced to 1831 (Gott 2010), providing the garment with a degree of historical depth that belies its European origins. As one woman explained to Suzanne Gott, “*kaba* is our national custom. It’s our real Ghanaian dress” (Gott 2010:19). In contrast to local fashions are international fashions: garments that blend two or more dis-



3 Women's world fashions at the 1957 opening of the Ambassador Hotel in Accra, including a daring, strapless evening gown (far right), the *Sunday Mirror*.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archive

tinct styles of dress while actively maintaining and referencing their coexisting styles' national and cultural origins. International and local fashions may both be forms of hybridized dress, but international fashions remain foreign and are recognized as such, whereas the European elements of local fashions are subsumed as part of a distinctly Ghanaian form of dress.

THE "GOLD COAST TOUCH":

ACCRA'S PRE-INDEPENDENCE FASHION CULTURE

At the time of Chez Julie's return from Paris in 1961, a vibrant and complex fashion culture was already firmly established in Accra. This is evidenced by the extensive photographic and written documentation of fashion in the *Sunday Mirror*, a weekly publication that highlighted the arts and cultural activities of Ghana, with a particular focus on Accra. With its continuous accounts of the latest and most popular forms of dress, the *Sunday Mirror* provides a powerful lens to assess the development of Accra's fashion culture from the early 1950s until today, serving as the most consistent documentation of Accra's vibrant sartorial expressions.

An analysis of photographs and articles in the *Sunday Mirror* from 1953 through 1957 encapsulates the vibrancy and distinctiveness of Accra's pre-independence fashion culture. Examples of world fashions were repeatedly featured on the pages of the *Sunday Mirror*, exemplified by the coverage of the 1957 opening of the Ambassador Hotel, described as "one of the most color-

ful events in Accra in recent times" ("Glamour ..." 1957). The event attracted a diverse crowd of elite Ghanaians, including three women described as "not contestants at a fashion show. Just spectators at the official opening of the Ambassador Hotel" ("Glamour ..." 1957). The accompanying photograph documents the women's elaborate world fashions (Fig. 3). Adjacent to this photograph is an additional image of women's fashions that includes a *kaba* sewn from kente cloth, a historically significant, strip-woven material that became synonymous with a pan-Ghanaian identity during the late 1950s (Fig. 4) (Ross 1998). This literal juxtaposition of world fashions with local, specifically Ghanaian fashions captures the coexistence of these two realms of fashion in Accra, particularly in relation to women's dress.

The Jaguar, one of the many possible variations on the *kaba* form, provides the strongest evidence that Ghanaians were highly attuned to the rapidly changing styles of specifically Ghanaian attire. The Jaguar first appeared on the front page of the December 20, 1953, issue of the *Sunday Mirror*. A photograph captured two women casually strolling in matching outfits comprising a wrapped skirt and a matching peplum blouse (Fig. 5). Whereas the wrapped skirt was relatively simplistic, the blouse featured a variety of innovations, including a scalloped v-neckline, scalloped sleeves, and a dramatic, exaggerated ruffle along the bottom of the blouse. These stylistic elements resulted in an ensemble that exposed the upper chest and back, while creating an exuberant hemline that exaggerated and drew attention to the wearer's hips. A second photograph displaying the back of the garments—likely included to facilitate copying by women's

4 Women's world and local fashions at the 1957 opening of the Ambassador Hotel in Accra, including a woman wearing a kente *kaba* (center left), the *Sunday Mirror*.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archive





5 Miss Ivy Bamor (left) and Miss Sarah Abbey (right) wearing the Jaguar, 1953, the *Sunday Mirror*.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archive



6 A back view of Miss Ivy Bamor (left) and Miss Sarah Abbey (right) wearing the Jaguar, 1953, the *Sunday Mirror*.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archive

individual seamstresses—was published with a caption stating that this new style of *kaba* “has been hailed with every manifestation of delight by women of society and fashion in Accra” (“Jaguar” 1953:10) (Fig. 6).

By 1955, the Jaguar fell out of favor with Ghana’s fashion-conscious women. In an article from the *Sunday Mirror*, the photograph of the two women was reprinted with a starkly different caption. The fashion contributor recognized that the Jaguar originally “set the fashion tongues wagging,” but further stated that “the ‘jaguar’ is being superseded by the ‘Opera 4.15’” (Wuver 1955:6). Four months later, Wuver’s account of the Jaguar was expanded by an unknown author, who described it as “an ugly and objectionably looking design. It is not designed in conformity with an acceptable theory with regard to warmth, modesty, or elegance” (“Jaguar Is not Decent” 1955). The author argued that the style “affords very little opportunity for variety and gives a very bad impression of the women who wear it,” ultimately concluding that the Jaguar represented “a remarkable deterioration in the dress of our women” (“Jaguar Is not Decent” 1955). Its revealing neckline and profusion of ruffles likely led to the Jaguar’s demise—the features that initially made

it so distinctive and celebrated. The Jaguar ultimately attests to the existence of a specifically local, Ghanaian realm of fashion that was an active and important part of Accra’s vibrant and capricious fashion system.

In addition to world and local fashions, Ghanaian women were active purchasers and producers of international fashions. The most prominent international fashions were inspired by Asian dress styles, such as the fluctuating popularity of the Indian sari. On the cover of a 1953 issue of the *Sunday Mirror*, a photograph depicts a woman identified as Florence Mettle wearing what the newspaper headlined as “A Sari Style” (Fig. 7). The caption stated: “Indian wrap is a special Indian fashion, but Florence Mettle of Accra has given it a Gold Coast touch (“A Sari Style” 1953). The “Gold Coast touch” is presumably Mettle’s choice of fabric, a wax print cloth.

Ghanaian women were also inspired by East Asian styles of dress, particularly a variation on the *cheongsam* or *qipao*.³ In 1956 and 1957, photographs of Chinese women wearing the *qipao* were featured in issues of the *Sunday Mirror*, with one image accompanied by a clear description of the garment’s overall tailoring (“Travel Goods Change Fashion” 1955) (Fig. 8).



7 Florence Mettle wearing a “sari style” with a “Gold Coast touch,” 1953, the *Sunday Mirror*.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archive

By 1958, a photograph of two Ghanaian women dressed in “the Eastern look” graced the front page of an issue of the *Sunday Mirror* (Fig. 9). The contributor noted that “a touch of Eastern style and it makes all the difference to Ghanaian women’s traditional way of dressing.” The contributor continued: “they take your mind to China and other Eastern countries, but are still essentially Ghanaian” (“The Eastern Look” 1958). As this quote indicates, the garment’s Asian inspiration did not detract from its identification as a Ghanaian form of dress; attributing it to Asia, while simultaneously classifying it as “essentially Ghanaian,” indicates the existence and importance of international fashions as part of Accra’s pre-independence fashion culture.

The coexistence of these forms of sartorial expression demonstrates Ghana’s complex and vibrant pre-independence fashion culture that consisted of world, local, and international fashions. These fashion realms, which championed a degree of inventiveness and fusion in terms of their styles and materials, encouraged the continued experimentation and expansion of Ghanaian fashion following the country’s independence, resulting in a new space in Accra’s fashion culture, for garments that existed on the seams of world, international, and local fashions while invoking cosmopolitan and nationalist identities. These hybrid fashions, which blended established categories of dress with new modes of thought, encouraged the introduction of Ghanaian fashion designers and their innovative approaches to fashion, exemplified by Chez Julie.

“HER THINGS ARE CLASSIC ... EVER-GREEN”: THE CAREER AND CREATIONS OF CHEZ JULIE

Chez Julie was born Juliana Norteye in 1933, one of twelve children. Her father worked at the post office in Nsawam, a town in the Eastern region of Ghana located 40 km outside of Accra. Chez Julie was taught sewing by her mother, but her interest in fashion was sparked by her domestic sciences teacher Eleanor Sam. Sam served as Chez Julie’s role model; Chez Julie’s sister Edith François recollected that Sam was a “fashionable woman,” who dressed in the style of a “British lady ... hats, gloves, stockings, everything”⁴ (Fig. 10).

Chez Julie’s parents highly valued education and ensured that all of their children attended school through standard 7. Following the completion of her education, Chez Julie began working at the Ministry of Education, where she continued to sew garments to earn extra income.⁵ It was during her time at the ministry that Chez Julie made her first appearance in the *Sunday Mirror*, in a 1958 article that highlighted a dress she named “the Hall and Chamber frock” (“These New Fashions” 1958) (Fig. 11). The columnist praised Chez Julie for her creativity, stating she “has hundreds of [fashions] in her head” (“These New Fashions” 1958). As one of Chez Julie’s earliest documented designs, the photograph further attests to her active creation of world fashions inspired by British designs.

Shortly after her premiere in the *Sunday Mirror*, Chez Julie was awarded a partial scholarship from the Cocoa Marketing Board to further her education abroad. Although the official reasons for her scholarship are unknown, it was likely part of Kwame Nkrumah’s initiative to develop a highly educated group of Ghanaians that would contribute to his nation-building and the “modernization” of Ghana. At the age of twenty-six, Chez Julie departed Accra for Paris to attend France’s oldest fashion school, Ecole Guerre-Lavigne. The school emphasized highly skilled, technical training through courses in fashion design, pattern making, and sewing. Chez Julie completed her four-year degree in three years, partially due to the difficulties she encountered as a non-French speaking African in Paris.⁶ After graduation, Chez Julie embarked on a journey to visit several dressmakers and fashion designers in Germany, England, Austria, Belgium, and Switzerland before returning to Ghana in 1961 (“Julie” 1961:8). Following the announcement of her return to Accra, Chez Julie’s latest designs were featured in a two-page spread in the *Sunday Mirror* (Fig. 12). The dresses illustrated in the article were European in style, yet the author asserted that “when I visited Julie at her Christianborg home, I observed not only dress styles typical of each of the countries she visited, but Julie had started working on several new creations to suit the African personality” (“Julie” 1961:8). Shortly following the *Sunday Mirror*’s feature on her lat-



est fashions, Chez Julie moved her workshop from her father's garage to a small building she rented on Oxford Street in Osu. As her daughter Brigitte Naa-Ode Kragbé recollected, it was at this location that "Chez Julie was really known."⁷

Sometime during the mid-1960s, Chez Julie was recruited by the newly founded Ghana Textiles Production (GTP), Ghana's first state-owned textile manufacturing company. The introduction of a locally produced wax print fabric attests to the expansiveness of Nkrumah's nationalist efforts and the continued importance of specific textiles in creating a post-independence identity through dress. Chez Julie created fashionable garments for their ad campaigns and promotional calendars and designed garments for their annual fashion shows held at the State House in Accra. Chez Julie recounted her initial collaboration with GTP: "I remember at that time, we were calling all the material 'cedi cloth' because it was



8 Chinese women wearing the *cheongsam* or *qipao*, 1955, the *Sunday Mirror*.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archive

9 Two Ghanaian women wearing the "Eastern Look," 1958, the *Sunday Mirror*.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archive



10 Photograph of Juliana “Chez Julie” Norteye (middle) and her sisters Edith (right) and Gladys (left) in Kumasi, 1950. This photograph illustrates Chez Julie’s active emulation of British fashions at a young age. Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of Edith François.

being sold for one *cedi* a yard. Not many people were interested in African prints then. Those who did preferred the imported ones from Holland” (“Chez Julie” 1991:13). Chez Julie’s partnership encouraged the incorporation of wax print textiles into her own designs and likely contributed to the burgeoning popularity of locally produced wax print fabrics. Her wax print fashions were distinctive because she skillfully combined GTP’s fabrics with innovative and bold designs that reflected global fashion trends of the era, resulting in designer fashions that boldly asserted Ghanaian’s nationalist and cosmopolitan identities, a realm of fashion that continues to resonate with Accra’s current generation of designers and consumers.

In addition to her collaboration with GTP, Norteye organized annual fashion shows for her Chez Julie label. In 1965, her fashion show was described as a “full-scale one-night international fashion show, featuring [the] latest designs from many parts of the world ... held under the patronage of Madame Fathima Nkrumah” (“Big” 1965). The sponsorship of Nkrumah’s wife attests to the political significance of Chez Julie’s fashions and how her career and designs were inextricably linked to Nkrumah’s post-independence policies and his conceptions of nationhood. In 1973, Chez Julie moved her boutique

to a location closer to Danquah Circle on Oxford Street, where it remains to this day. Chez Julie hosted annual fashion shows through the 1990s, occasionally making trips to New York City and Los Angeles to showcase her designs at various trade shows. In 1991, Chez Julie celebrated her thirtieth anniversary as a fashion designer with a special fashion show at the Golden Tulip Hotel (“Chez Julie” 1991:13). Instead of organizing a retrospective of her most important designs, Chez Julie chose to feature garments from her fashion label that received less coverage in Accra’s popular media, including garments of batik, tie and dye, and screen-printed fabrics, the material of which she produced herself (Fig. 13). Two years after her thirtieth anniversary, Chez Julie passed away suddenly, sending shock waves through Accra’s fashion community. Despite her daughter’s attempts to run Chez Julie’s business from Côte d’Ivoire, the venture proved unprofitable and the boutique remained vacant for almost ten years. In 2002, Kragbé returned to Ghana and reopened the boutique, which remains open to this day. Even though Chez Julie’s passing was over twenty years ago, her legacy as Accra’s first fashion designer lives on; when Kragbé first reopened her mother’s boutique: “people would come and cry to me ‘Oh, you kept your mother’s shop. I still have the clothes in my wardrobe; they don’t go out of fashion’.”⁸ Kragbé’s recollection attests to the enduring appreciation of Chez Julie’s designs, garments that were highly innovative during their time, but created with a level of sophistication and visual appeal that ensured their longevity. As François stated: “her things are classic ... ever-green.”⁹

**“A NEW STYLE OF OUR TRADITIONAL COVER CLOTH”:
ACCRA’S NATIONALIST AND COSMOPOLITAN
DESIGNER FASHIONS**

Although Chez Julie created a diverse array of designer fashion garments, her creations “to suit the African personality,” which were informed by Nkrumah and Ghana’s post-independence culture, remain the most important expressions of Ghanaian mid-twentieth-century fashion. In order for Nkrumah to maintain his position as leader amidst opposition from political factions, he embarked on a mission to create a homogenized population through the careful and calculated presentation of specific cultural practices that represented his own vision of a modern African nation. A crucial aspect of creating this image of a newly independent Ghana was through the promotion of specific forms of dress that blended global styles and aesthetics with Ghanaian forms of visual culture (Hess 2006, Biney 2011).

As a further indicator of the nationalist importance of fashion, the subject was regularly discussed and debated in the *Daily Graphic* and the *Sunday Mirror*, particularly fashion’s ability to assert a distinctly Ghanaian, post-independence identity. With remarkable foresight, the author August Bruce stated that “with the granting of Independence to the Gold Coast, new vistas for the development of our national cultural identity will be opened up. And it may no longer be prudent or wise for us to continue apeing our white benefactors particularly in their mode of dressing” (Bruce 1956). As an alternative to Western dress, Bruce suggested that “our dressmakers will have to evolve a new style of our traditional cover cloth for those of our working girls who wish ... to still dress in the traditional style” (Bruce 1956).¹⁰



Ghanaian fashion is also constitutive of cosmopolitanism: a global phenomenon localized by specific groups in particular cultural settings (Turino 2000). In the context of Accra's fashion culture, cosmopolitanism describes the phenomenon of blending and borrowing cultural elements and materials to create garments that are the result of global interactions, yet identified as local forms of creative expression. Beginning with the designs of Chez Julie, Accra's designer fashions have consistently served as a product, as well as a barometer, of the cosmopolitan nature of the city and its residents. The fashions of Accra's elite citizens indicate their belonging to a global fashion system while maintaining their rich and vibrant historical dress practices, asserting a transformable conception of nationalism that indicates their inherent power as independent and autonomous Ghanaians.

It is within this post-independence context, a time of intense creativity and the coalescence of a vibrant, yet essentialized Ghanaian identity, that Chez Julie created two of her most culturally and historically significant fashions, the *akwadzan* and a kente *kaba*. She constructed these garments through the careful interweaving of global and local styles, resulting in garments that reflected the values of a majority of Ghanaians in Accra and the values and governmental policies of Nkrumah.



11 A photograph of Chez Julie modeling her "Hall and Chamber Frock," 1958, the *Sunday Mirror*.
Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of Edith François and the Daily Graphic archive

12 Edith François modeling one of Chez Julie's world fashions, as seen in the article "Julie: Girl with Ambition," 1961, the *Sunday Mirror*.
Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of Edith François.

It was this collective desire to uphold Ghanaian historical dress practices, but to suggest a more internationally aware nation, that ultimately imbued Chez Julie's designs. These garments represented Chez Julie's creations for the "African personality" and indicate the naissance of Accra's nationalist and cosmopolitan designer fashions.

"FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY ...":

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHEZ JULIE'S AKWADZAN

In 1968, Chez Julie introduced her groundbreaking *akwadzan*, but it would remain unmentioned in popular media until its unveiling at Ghana's 1971 annual Trade Fair. A *Daily Graphic* columnist celebrated Chez Julie's latest menswear creation, stating "for the first time in the history of Ghanaian fashion, the men's cloth has been converted into a manageable outfit with an open-



13 Edith François wearing an elaborately embroidered caftan of batik fabric dyed and sewn by Chez Julie, late 1960s–early 1970s.
Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of Edith François.

ing for the head” (“Something for the Men Too” 1971). The *akwadzan*, described by the *Sunday Mirror* as “the men’s traditional cloth turned into a sewn outfit,” refers to a Ga word that implies the dress practice of wrapping a cloth around the upper torso (“Chez Julie” 1991:11)¹¹ (Fig. 14). Chez Julie tailored her *akwadzan* to include a head and armhole; in addition to this “slip-over cloth,” she created a matching pair of shorts to be worn underneath (“Something ...” 1971).

Chez Julie created her tailored version of the *akwadzan* because “she had heard a lot of complaints from men about their inability to wear cloth in the correct way, so she decided

to come up with a solution, hence the birth of ... the *Akwadzan*” (“Something ...” 1971). In addition to its simplicity, Chez Julie’s *akwadzan* mimicked the flow and draping of a wrapped textile, evoking the elegance and abundance of fabric often associated with this form of dress. François explained that Norteye created the tailored *akwadzan* “to make it easy for people to put on the traditional cloth because you’ve seen the men, they’re always adjusting.”¹² Ghanaians were continually encouraged to wear cloth wrappers as a sign of Ghanaian national identity, but as reflected in François’s comment, the wearing of woven cloth was often viewed as a complicated and cumbersome process. The difficulty of wearing a wrapped textile is echoed by the 1973 *Sunday Mirror* instructional article “Know How to Put on Cloth.” As the author explains, “traditionally, the cloth is the Ghanaian attire ... but to put it on the correct way is what many Ghanaians find difficult to do. On this page, we are introducing to Ghanaians and foreigners alike stages of putting on the cloth” (“Know How ...” 1973). Eight photographs accompanied this article and demonstrated the proper techniques for wrapping the body with cloth (Fig. 15). In contrast, the *Sunday Mirror* columnist attested to the relative ease of wearing Chez Julie’s *akwadzan*: “no more will the house be full of pre-outing crisis of ‘Oh this cloth! Or ‘I just don’t know how to manage it!’ Just slip your ‘ntama’ or ‘Akwadzan’ over your head and you’re all set (“Something ...” 1971).

The *Sunday Mirror* published a series of photographs to accompany the article on Chez Julie’s *akwadzan*, which demonstrated the ease of donning the garment (Fig. 14). In the final image, Chez Julie’s model Big Boy is shown properly wearing the *akwadzan* with the following caption: “Big Boy poses majestically in the *Akwadzan*, which seems to have lost none of the traditional manliness in its creation” (“Something ...” 1971). This comment implies that despite Chez Julie’s modifications to this form of attire, the *akwadzan* evokes the form of wrapping a male body in cloth and embodies the “majestic” qualities of this historical dress that are often considered the epitome of Asante, and more generally speaking, Ghanaian traditional culture. In a photograph from François’s collection, Big Boy is shown holding the *akwadzan* in his hands, emphasizing Chez Julie’s innovation (Fig. 16). The material of Big Boy’s *akwadzan*, a form of *adinkra* cloth as evidenced by the fabric’s stamped motifs, adds an additional layer of significance to the garment. *Adinkra* is primarily worn at funerals to show respect for the deceased. By cutting and tailoring *adinkra*, a textile that continues to serve as a symbol of Ghanaian culture and appropriate funeral attire, Chez Julie was actively adapting a marker of tradition to better represent the changing culture of Ghana and the cosmopolitan identities of Accra’s citizens.

A second photograph of Chez Julie’s *akwadzan* depicts a female model identified as “Zilla” wearing an *akwadzan* of wax print fabric paired with a floor-length skirt (Fig. 17). As François and I conversed about Ghana’s historical dress practices, she emphasized that wrapping the upper torso in cloth in the “over-the-shoulder” style was almost exclusively the prerogative of men. As she explained, women typically wrapped the lower half of their body in cloth, dressing their torso with a European style blouse, an obvious reference to the historically rooted Ghanaian *kaba*.



14 "Something for the Men Too," 1971, the Daily Graphic.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archive

15 Images of Osei Asibey Bonsu demonstrating the various stages of wrapping a body in woven fabric for the article "Know How to Put on a Cloth," 1973, the Sunday Mirror.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archive

16 "Big Boy" shown with Chez Julie's *akwadzan*, emphasizing the innovation of its form, c. 1968.

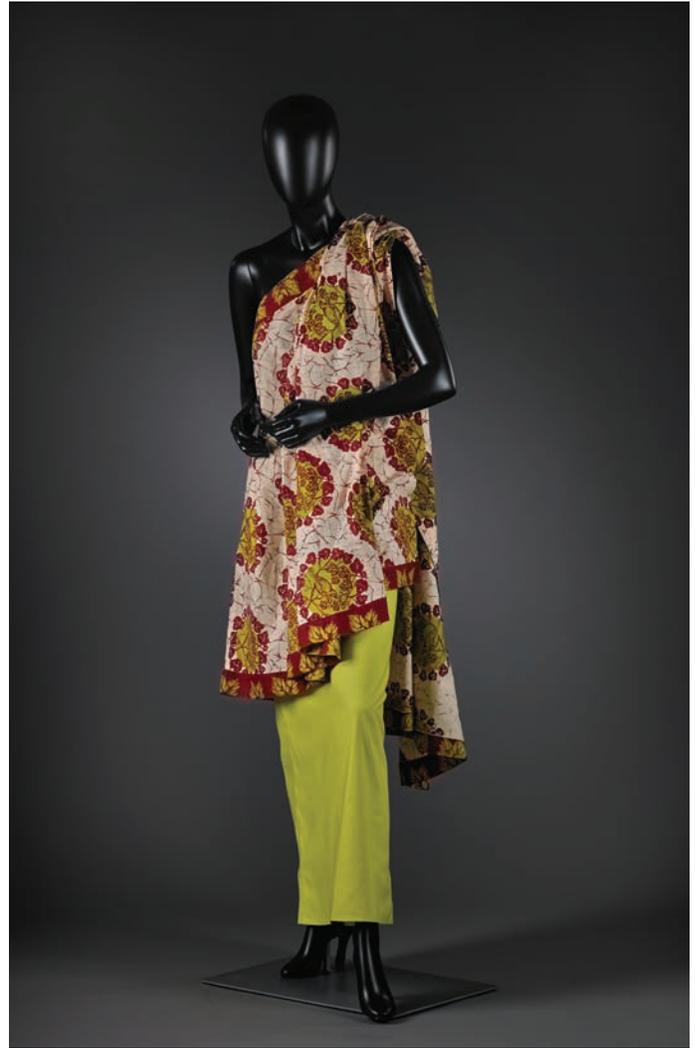
Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of Edith François.



The established and strongly gendered divisions of Ghanaian dress do not suggest that Ghanaian women never wrap their torsos with cloth in the "over-the-shoulder" style. Asante women have been known to wear the *dansinkran*, an ensemble consisting of wrapped cloths for the upper and lower portions of the body. This form of dress, considered to be a respectful and dignified form of attire, is largely restricted to queen mothers, elderly women, and mourners at Asante funerals (Gott 2010:13, 2009:153). The previously referenced 1953 *Sunday Mirror* article "A Sari Style" further indicates that Ghanaian women were wearing toga-style wrappers of cloth around their upper torsos prior to independence; however, as an example of an international fashion, Ghanaian women's interpretations of the Indian sari were likely viewed as an imported form of attire that did not contradict or challenge Ghanaian dress practices (Fig. 7).

The acknowledgement that young Ghanaian women did not regularly wear the "over-the-shoulder" style of wrapped cloth adds an additional layer of significance to Chez Julie's female *akwadzan*. By converting a form of dress broadly viewed as the prerogative of men and elderly Asante women into a stylish fashion for young Ghanaians, the female *akwadzan* served dual purposes: it challenged notions of Ghanaian "traditional manliness" and "dignified respectability," while revolutionizing and reinvigorating established forms of culturally significant dress for a younger, female audience.

Chez Julie's *akwadzan* challenged established conceptions of female dress and appearance similar to southern Nigerian women's appropriation of the *agbada*, a voluminous tunic-style garment associated with elitism and masculinity (Bastian 1996). The *akwadzan* provided young Ghanaian women with a voluminous and elegant silhouette that served as a significant departure from the prevailing forms of tailored blouses and dresses that dominated Ghanaian women's historical fashions (Fig. 18). Despite



the innovative nature of Chez Julie's female *akwadzan*, there is no evidence that suggests it caused controversies similar to the ones generated by southern Nigerian women's appropriation of *agbadas*. In terms of dress, and particularly in regards to fashion, Accra's citizens are overwhelmingly receptive to the modification and reinvention of historical forms; this approach is best summarized by former First Lady Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, who reflected on her youthful fashions during the 1960s by stating "it was anything goes."¹³ This acceptance of experimentation with established dress forms allowed for Chez Julie to create both versions of her *akwadzan*, which ultimately encouraged the continuation of historical dress practices by adapting the forms for a younger audience, producing a form of fashion that resonated with Ghanaians' post-independence ideals of nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

**"YOU WILL WEAR IT, AND YOU'LL WEAR IT, AND YOU'LL WEAR IT":
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHEZ JULIE'S KENTE KABA**

In addition to her male and female *akwadzans*, Chez Julie created an equally important *kaba* (Fig. 19). Due to the garment's inclusion in François's series of dress photographs, the *kaba* likely dates to the late 1960s. The garment is stylistically simple, consisting of a top with a low-cut back and a wide strip of

17 "Zilla" wearing a female version of Chez Julie's *Akwadzan*, c. 1968.

Photo: Unknown photographer, courtesy of Edith François.

18 Chez Julie's *akwadzan* as photographed for the exhibition "Kabas and Couture: Contemporary Ghanaian Fashion" at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, 2015.

Photo: Randy Batista

material that forms pockets along the hemline. It was originally accompanied by a wrapped textile, which mimicked the form of a floor-length skirt. Most significantly, Chez Julie constructed the *kaba* from hand-woven kente cloth. François's recollections elucidate this significance: "at one time, kente was very expensive ... people didn't want to cut it, kente was precious."¹⁴ François's mother-in-law even chided her for wearing tailored kente garments, exclaiming "Oh, you've spoiled your kente!" but François rebuffed her mother-in-law's laments: "You know that you will wear it, and you'll wear it, and you'll wear it, and it's not spoiled."¹⁵ As suggested by François's comments, she valued her Chez Julie kente fashions because, like the *akwadzan*, they were



more wearable than existing styles of historical dress and they attested to her cosmopolitan identity, while invoking an immediately identifiable nationalism.

Despite the insistence of her family and the *Sunday Mirror*'s attribution of Chez Julie as the originator of the "kente craze," Chez Julie was likely not the first Ghanaian to cut and tailor kente cloth.¹⁶ The earliest example of an innovative kente fashion was featured in the *Sunday Mirror* on March 16, 1958. Under the headline "New Role for Kente," an unknown contributor exclaims: "a new slant on women's fashions! The model, Mrs. Alice Ababio (right), is wearing a flared afternoon dress with the skirt and the V-neckline trimmed with strips of kente" (Fig. 20). The slender width of Ababio's kente stripes suggests that a larger strip of kente cloth was cut to create the dynamic striping on the skirt of her dress. This example illustrates that new modes for wearing kente cloth, which served as radical departures from its historically rooted use as a wrapped textile, were introduced almost immediately following the country's independence.

Although the aforementioned feature from the *Sunday Mirror* attests to Ghanaians' experimentation with cutting and tailoring kente cloth during the late 1950s, the predominant trend of the independence era was for women to wear kente as a wrapped skirt paired with a solid-colored blouse. The 1958 *Sunday Mirror*



19 Phyllis Lamptey modeling Chez Julie's kente kaba, c. 1968.

Photo: Photographer unknown, courtesy of Edith François.

20 Mrs. Alice Ababio (right) wearing a dress featuring strips of kente, 1958, the *Sunday Mirror*.

Photo: Photographer unknown, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archives.

article "The Kente Cloth and the Fanciful Blouse" was accompanied by two photographs of seven Ghanaian women wearing an incredible array of wrapped kente cloth skirts paired with peplum blouses (Fig. 21). These hybrid *kaba* ensembles became popular as stylish and nationalistic forms of attire for women, particularly for special events. The persistence of pairing wrapped kente with a simple blouse indirectly suggests that Chez Julie's tailored kente garments, exemplified by her kente *kaba*, were indeed revolutionary. Chez Julie's kente fashions challenged the accepted forms for wearing kente cloth, creating tailored garments that were simultaneously globally inspired yet distinctly Ghanaian. Although Chez Julie was not the first to experiment with kente cloth, she was the



first Ghanaian fashion designer to create tailored garments from kente, earning her the designation as originator of contemporary kente fashions (Fig. 22).

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHEZ JULIE AND ACCRA'S HISTORICAL FASHION CULTURE

Accra, as the site of a complex and vibrant historical fashion culture that thrived on originality and experimentation, ultimately cultivated the innovative designs of Juliana “Chez Julie” Norteye. Chez Julie became the first prominent Ghanaian fashion designer to successfully revolutionize Ghanaian forms of historical dress. Inspired and informed by Nkrumah’s nationalism, as well as her experiences abroad, Chez Julie reconstructed the physical forms of Ghanaian textiles and dress by blending them with global fashion trends, creating styles that preserved Ghana’s historical dress practices, while asserting Ghanaians’ participation in a global fashion network. Chez Julie’s garments are the first cosmopolitan designer fashions in Accra imbued with a distinct and identifiable nationalist influence. Additionally, Chez Julie’s most significant fashions, particularly her *akwadzan*, challenged established conceptions of gender, providing young women new means for sartorial self-expression in post-independence Accra.

Chez Julie’s introduction and the subsequent acceptance of nationalist and cosmopolitan designer fashions ushered in a new realm of fashion in Accra that has continued until today. Chez Julie’s garments have earned their description as “classic” and “ever-green,” as her innovations to Ghanaian dress have allowed successive fashion designers to further reimagine historically significant textiles and dress practices, ultimately reflecting the changing nature of Accra and its cosmopolitan citizens. Chez Julie’s creations encapsulate the power of fashion in Accra, illustrating its importance as a prominent and accessible form of artistic expression that resonates with a broad swath of Ghanaians. Designer fashions, both in Ghana and across the African continent, serve as powerful and material evidence for the continued revision of historical practices and cultural expressions.

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21 Ghanaian women wearing kente wrappers and peplum blouses, 1958, the *Sunday Mirror*. Photo: Photographer unknown, courtesy of the Daily Graphic archives.

22 Chez Julie’s kente kaba as photographed for the exhibition “Kabas and Couture: Contemporary Ghanaian Fashion” at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, 2015. Photo: Randy Batista

Notes

1 The majority of early documentation refers to her as Juliana Norteye, although she married in the early 1960s and became Juliana Kweifio-Okai. Despite her name change, her family insists that most of Accra's citizens did not know her true name and referred to her simply as "Chez Julie." Due to the popularity of her brand name and the preference of her family, this article will refer to Juliana Kweifio-Okai as Chez Julie.

2 Unfortunately, the *Daily Graphic* does not have the resources to properly house and conserve their extensive archival collection of newspapers and photographs. Many of the archive's oldest photographs and their corresponding negatives, which date to the early 1950s, have been destroyed by Ghana's unrelenting heat, hindering the quality of the historical photographs reproduced here.

3 The *qipao* is a form-fitting dress with short sleeves that became popular in the 1920s among elite and fashion-conscious Chinese women. The collar of the garment is more commonly and pejoratively referred to as a "Mandarin collar." The *qipao* is primarily worn by women in China and Taiwan, although similar garments are found in Tibet and Vietnam.

4 Edith François, personal interview, 2012.

5 Edith François, personal interview, 2012.

6 Edith François, personal interview, 2012; Brigitte Naa-Ode Kragbé, personal interview, June 2012.

7 Brigitte Naa-Ode Kragbé, personal interview, June 2012.

8 Brigitte Naa-Ode Kragbé, personal interview, June 2012.

9 Edith François, personal interview, 2014.

10 Bruce's reference to the "traditional cover cloth" likely refers to wax print fabric, which would historically have been worn wrapped around the waist and also around the breasts (if not worn in the more broadly accepted *kaba* style). This can be surmised by a photograph accompanying his article, showing a young woman wearing two pieces of wax print fabric, one worn around the waist, the other tied over one shoulder in what Bruce described as a "sari" style.

11 Edith François, personal interview, 2012.

12 Edith François, personal interview, 2012.

13 Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, personal interview, 2012.

14 Edith François, personal interview, 2012.

15 Edith François, personal interview, 2012.

16 According to the *Sunday Mirror*, "some elderly Ghanaians recall that the current kente craze which involves the combination of plain fabrics and kente was introduced way back in the 1960s under the Chez Julie trade name" ("Chez Julie" 1991:13).

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