The Lagos Space Programme's Re/construction and Queering of Masculinity

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Abstract

There is a growing number of African fashion designers who use their work to contribute to queer artistic production. This article examines how non-gendered forms are viewed concerning fashion styles in sub-Saharan Africa. In doing this, the article considers the narratives in gendered items of clothing. Focusing on the Lagos Space Programme this article incorporates visual and textual analyses of the fashion pieces available on the brand's official *Instagram* page. The article examines the imagery, fashion films, and design statements for different collections as well as the brand's manifestos and interviews with its creative director, Adeju Thompson. This article demonstrates how the projects of this brand are invested in reconstructing, queering, and pluralising African masculinities. This article ultimately highlights how fashion can be a site for contesting the presentation of queer identities and challenging the binary ways of thinking about gender identities.

Introduction

In this article, we examine the fashion work of the Lagos Space Programme under the creative directorship of Adeju Thompson. Despite their growing influence, Thompson's work has attracted minimal scholarly attention. Their work is featured on the cover of the book, *Fashioning the Afropolis: Histories, materialities and aesthetic practices*, a book that deals with the notion of fashion and the city within African studies (Pinther, Kastner and Ndjio 2022). In the introduction to this book, Pinther and Kastner (2022, p.1) characterise Thompson's work as steadily challenging the idea of Nigerian and particularly Lagosian fashion design. Critically, though, Pinther and Kastner state that Thompson's "explorations into past textile and sartorial practices not only led to the creation of new shapes but also

helped to unveil hidden or sidelined societal beliefs and epistemologies" (Pinther and Kastner 2022, p.1). In this article, Thompson's exploration is significant because it proposes a continual expansion of myriad ways in which sartoriality is used to rethink African masculinities. Through the Lagos Space Programme, Thompson contributes to a growing body of work on queer artistic production in Africa which showcases how fashion can serve as a social, cultural, and political practice. Thompson has previously said about their work "I like the idea that people can see my work and expand their visual references of what they think African design is" (Benissan 2023). In an interview with French documentary filmmaker and journalist, Loïc Prigent, Thompson, who identifies as queer and non-binary, elaborates that an important aspect of their work highlights a common misconception that queerness is a Western construct.[1]

In the seminal work, *Queer African Reader*, Ekine and Abbas state that documenting queer lives is about valourising "the complexity of how queer liberation is framed in Africa and by Africans" (2013, p.3). This article sets out to contribute to this scholarly discourse of valourising African lived experiences by using the Lagos Space Programme as a case study. We focus on how Thompson's work evidences a fashion designer's queering specific elements of masculinities in Lagos. Thereby offering and expanding understandings of diverse masculinities that exist in this urban city. Grounded in Lagos, the fashion brand Lagos Space Programme depicts a type of masculinity that draws, in part, from Lagosian, Yoruba, and other external resources. Thus, serving as our primary case study, Thompson's fashion work produces the narrative of re-assessing, pluralising, reconstructing, and queering masculinities through the Lagosian fashion lens. In this article, we focus primarily on four of their collections namely: Project 4: *Gurreilla* (Spring/Summer 2019), Project 5: *Aṣọ Lànkí, Kí Ató Ki Ènìyàn* (Autumn/Fall 2021), Project 7: *Post-Adire* (Autumn/Fall 2023), and Project 8: *Cloth as queer archive* (Spring/Summer 2024). These collections exemplify how fashion can be used to rethink, reimagine, and queer masculinities in an African context.

Re/constructing Masculinities

Considering that this article will discuss the construction of a specific kind of masculinity in Lagos, it is pertinent to examine how masculinities are constructed and imagined in Africa broadly and Nigeria in particular. We acknowledge scholars who contend that within the African continent, as is the case elsewhere, there are various forms through which masculinities are expressed (Morrell and Ouzgane 2005; Uchendu 2008; Ratele 2008; Rothmann 2022). The concept of masculinity is framed around societal beliefs about what it means to be and to perform maleness and manhood. It is both descriptive and prescriptive in the sense that the physical appearance of a man confers some social status. This descriptive and prescriptive nature regards true manhood as something worthy of veneration and respect only when it is drawn from "heteromasculinity" (Ratele 2008, p.26). It is to the effect that one is not virile because he is a man, but one is a man because he is virile.

Masculinity constructed around heteromasculinity brings forth the concept of "hegemonic masculinity", a phrase associated with Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985). Focusing on the African context, Morrell and Ouzgane (2005, p. 4) write about the dangers of hegemonic masculinity and describe it as having "established the cultural ideal for what it was to be a man" (also Fidolini 2024). However, in doing so, it "silenced other masculinities, and combated alternative visions of masculinity" (Morrell and Ouzgane 2005, p.4). As a consequence, there has been a deliberate act in scholarly works to pluralise the word to masculinities to pave the way for other forms of masculinities that are positively construed (See Morrell and Ouzgane 2005; Uchendu 2008; Ratele 2008).

We argue that it is, therefore, possible to be a man and not be masculine. As a result, masculinity as a concept cannot be limited to men who meet some narrow criteria. This is because it is possible to exhibit certain characteristics of masculinity that overshadow other inaccurately and narrowly accepted traits.

Uchendu (2007) is an example of previous scholarly work examining masculinity in Nigeria, closely related to our study context. Uchendu's research on masculinity among Nigerian youth concludes that the expression of masculinity cannot be generalised (Uchendu 2007, p.279). Our study of the Lagos Space Programme illustrates a gradual rethinking of masculinity in Nigeria, moving

> This article examines how non-gendered forms are viewed concerning fashion styles in sub-Saharan Africa.

beyond the traditional associations with physical strength, toughness, and domestic dominance.[2]

There is a tendency to prescribe gender roles specific to males and females based on sex only (Butler 1990; Butler 2004; Powell 2017). These sex differences give rise to prescribed gender roles that categorise male and female in a binary manner. This binary classification extends to all facets of human existence, normalising what has traditionally been defined as women's and men's clothing. It was thus, considered abnormal or incorrect for a male to wear a dress or any piece of clothing or accessory that was traditionally classified as feminine and vice versa.

It is necessary to point out the misconception that queering identity is synonymous with being queer. This stems from the narrative that ascribes identity to individuals based on certain mannerisms and traits such as clothing, bodily gestures, and speech. This narrative can lead to the misclassification of people based on expressions typically associated with a particular sex. For instance, a cisgender man may wear gender-neutral clothing and be perceived as gay, and the same applies to a cisgender woman who faces issues in classification.

Being queer on the other hand differs from queering identity in that those who are queer identify as gay or anywhere on the queer spectrum. It is a blend of gender identity and expression that makes them distinguishable in society. However, an individual can be queer without engaging in a gender expression that makes them noticeable, thereby avoiding stereotypes. We also contend that an individual can be queer without expressing this in social spaces, sometimes hiding the façade of masculinity or feminity to avoid punitive measures or social othering. Therefore, not every queer man conforms to a fashion that visibly expresses queerness. Since masculinity is one form of social expression for males, the need for further justification of virility can manifest in various aspects of physical appearance, including clothing.

This symbol of masculinity supports the self-verification theory which posits that people's relationships with objects are based on the meanings attached to those objects (Adomaitis et al. 2024, p.4). This suggests that people who identify as gay but express themselves differently may be concerned about their physical appearances and attentive to public opinion. Moreover, people who publically present as heterosexual also worry about their physical appearances as they seek to adhere to specific gender roles. Meanwhile, a pivotal moment in the history of genderlessness arose from the demand for more liberal spaces in the late twentieth century. Today, especially young men who seek freedom to wear any fashion styles, dress beyond styles traditionally attributed to specific genders. Therefore it is inaccurate to equate genderless or gender-neutral fashion with queerness. Butler aptly notes that the concepts of masculinity and femininity are naturalised through performativity (2004, p.42). However, due to its performative nature, gender also allows for the reconceptualisation of these notions in ways that make it possible for people to embrace new ways of being human.

In addition to the above, there is a thread that runs through the perception of nonbinarity: a man can feminise his expressions at will, and a female can do the same in gender-fluid spaces (Fan, 2023: 67, 69). There is a sense of motivation in nonbinarity that is often missing: the freedom to choose alternative possibilities that suit different people. These alternatives impress rather than impose themselves on people. Largely, there seems to be a deviation from the motivation of freedom that should be at the core of the concept. This is most clearly seen in the attribution of the male-female dichotomy and the claim that expressions can distort an established biological equilibrium. This claim is true but incomplete if we neglect a vital aspect that implies people should experience some level of mental shift and free their minds from stereotypes arising from a reductionist understanding of the world. It means that people can choose to wear any piece of clothing that is considered decent within the context of cultural

norms. We evoke cultural norms to refer to the inherent dynamism of culture. Thus, nonbinary fashion is not strictly the claim that a male (queer) person should be allowed to choose other forms of expression. The next question would be: what other forms of expression exist outside of being male or female? The inability of many proponents of gender fluidity to create a gender outside of a third (queer) implicates them in the critique of reductionism. The work of some African designers shows ways to sartorially critique the reductionist logic of what a man should look like, proposing alternative forms of expression.

Queer(ing) and Pluralising Masculinities in Works of African Fashion Designers

Bowstead writes that menswear in Southern and Western Africa is revitalising this area of fashion "by contributing new perspectives, aesthetics, and narratives" (2018, p.174). African fashion designers, like Adeju Thompson of Lagos Space Programme, are actively constructing new ideas about menswear, proposing to consumers and by extension society, alternative and queered fashion and dress practices for self-styling. Self-styling implies "technologies of the self" that hold "social potential, by its capacity, to generate ideas, images and ways of being in the city that were quite different from earlier ones" (Nuttall 2009, p.109). Nuttall further states that these technologies of the self "retain a political edge [that involve] a re-reading, a citing of the [...] past while drawing increasingly on a style which spoke to the future" (2009, p.109). Similarly, the Lagos Space Programme draws from and presents aspects of history in the present while proposing how the future of African masculinities can and will be expressed.

Writing about queer thought in the global South, Pereira asks: "can queer propositions of agency account for the forms chosen to express dissident bodies below the equator? Or, put another way: how do queer propositions of agency relate to chosen forms of expressing nonconforming bodies in the tropics?" (2019, p.7). We engage with these insightful questions by illustrating how African fashion designers reconstruct the sartorial. This process of reconstructing and queering is, as we argue, a technique used by the Lagos Space Programme to propose and pluralise masculinities that can be both African and queer. When using the verb "queering" in the context of fashion and dress, we denote, as Bowstead puts it, "subverting and overturning the common understandings of gender that have tended to lock men and women within rigid binary codes of behavior and, relatedly, as a way of fracturing hegemonic identities into more plural and diffuse subjectivities" (2018, p.124). In other words, it is an act of a fashion brand to facilitate the fashioned body's "escape and disruption of society's prescribed categories" (Mchunu 2023, p.19). Queerness in this sense is a process of unbundling the narrative of uniformity in favour of plurality. We therefore use it as a symbol of submerged voices in fashion practices such as those of fashion designers.

While our focus is on the Lagos Space Programme, the brand's exploration of queerness in fashion does not exist in a vacuum. Other designers and brands across Africa also explore queerness in their work. An example is Clive Rundle's 2010/2011 capsule collection showcased at Paris Fashion Week, titled, "Marie Antoinette returns to Paris after attending a lesbian wedding in Africa". Following Rundle, more brands have emerged including Rich Mnisi, Udiahgebi by Emerie Udiahgebi, Sevaria by Janie Bryan, Nao Serati, Vangei Official by Lolu Vangei, Muyishime by Patrick Muyishime, and Bola Yahaya founded by Bola Taofeek Yahaya. While the growing number of fashion designers exploring queerness indicates a new wave of expression, it is also important to consider the context in which some brands operate–contexts where queer lives exist under criminalising laws. In such situations, the designers demonstrate that fashion can serve both cultural and political purposes that challenge repressive conditions. African fashion designers and brands, including Thompson and the Lagos Space Programme, exercise their creative agency to highlight the irony of a system that refuses to recognise real expressions and identities specifically–queer identities.

The Lagos Space Programme: A Case Study of Fashioning New Masculinities

Sometimes labelled as a gender-neutral and genderless brand, and other times called a non-binary fashion label, the Lagos Space Programme was founded in 2018 (Benissan 2023; Rothery 2024; Fashion Trust Arabia n.d.; Industrie Africa n.d, Frieze 2023). Previously shortlisted for the

2021 LVMH, this award-winning fashion brand also won the International Woolmark Prize 2023 and the Fashion Trust Arabia (FTA): Emerge Prize 2023. The FTA website describes the Lagos Space Programme as offering "intellectual, high-end ready-to-wear collections while exploring parallel concepts through multidisciplinary collaborative projects" (Fashion Trust Arabia n.d). At the time of its launch, the brand states its manifesto as follows: "we will always create objects that promote a sense of national pride, we are Nigerians! Although we create clothes in a globalised world and are inspired by subcultures and movements that don't necessarily originate from Nigeria, all our references are always filtered through a Nigerian lens" (Lagos Space Programme Instagram n.d.). Pereira writes that "drawing out the horizons of different perspectives" has the potential to free queer studies from a paralysing tendency to universalise it (2010, p. 44). By centralizing the 'Nigeria' lens in this manifesto we understand the Lagos Space Programme as acknowledging its locality, which reflects the specific masculinity expressed through its collections.

Our study of the Lagos Space Programme as a fashion brand contributing to the theme of queer artistic production in Africa involved a meticulous process of visual and textual analysis of the brand's official *Instagram* page. The page includes imagery and design statements for each collection, as well as details about the research and design process. The Lagos Space Programme refers to each fashion collection as a 'project' which is followed by a chronological number and the title of that season's project. We could not find any record of the first two projects as the brand's *Instagram* page starts with Project 3, the *Awo-Workwear* collection. It is noted that this is the first collection presented under the Lagos Space Programme brand. This collection is followed by the Spring/Summer 2019 Project 4: *Gurreilla*. Project 5 is the Fall 2021 collection, *Aṣọ Lànkí, Kí Ató Ki Ènìyàn,* which translates to "we greet dress before we greet its wearer". The subsequent collections include Project 6: *Osun Sèègèsi*, and Project 7: *Post-Adire*. Following Project 7 is Project 8: *Cloth as a queer archive*. At the time of writing this article, the most recent collection was Project 9: *Invitation to Ojude Oba,* an Autumn/Winter 2024/2025 collection shown at Paris Fashion Week in January 2024.

Most projects are accompanied by fashion films that align with the brand's concept of representing queerness in works of fashion. The Instagram page is also rich in data, providing links to articles featuring Thompson's interviews with various publications that include *Vogue Business*, *Another Mag*, *Industria Africa*, and *Boy.Brother.Friend*. The combination of the projects' titles, design items in the collections, styling, imagery (both still and motion), and inspiration provide strong evidence of reconstructing and queering masculinities that are both African and queer.

Queering and Re/constructing Lagosian Masculinities: Key Moments in the Lagos Space Programme

The Lagos Space Programme is founded on Thompson's desire for freedom. From *The Fashion Agent Instagram* page (n.d.), it is explicitly clear that their experiences as someone who was othered due to their outfits largely inspired the fashion style expressed through the brand. Thompson recounts a 2019 incident involving a unit of the Nigerian police force, where they were physically assaulted and detained for being perceived as

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queer because of their clothing: "This traumatic experience pushed me to approach my practice as a form of protest, having these conversations around gender by highlighting cultural examples like the gender-bending ritual ceremony of the *Gẹlẹdẹ́* masquerades" (The Fashion Agent n.d.). This comment indicates that while protest motivated Thompson's style, the Lagos Space Programme has evolved into a form of decolonial fashion that integrates relevant modernity and tradition from both the Western and African contexts. In this situation, fashion is no longer a contest between opposites, but a critical engagement that provides reasons for influential intentional choices.

We examine some key fashion moments by the Lagos Space Programme that visually showcase a contextual and localised queerness that opens up other forms of masculinity. Brajalo discusses "queer(ing) surface" as fashion designers' practices in their use of fabrics and patterns to express queerness (2020, p.48). The Lagos Space Programme's queer(ing) of surface, a prominent feature of its concepts, has attracted some critique. For example, a commentator reacted to the Lagos Space Programme's *Instagram* post with the comment: "You can't force 'queer' theories on everything. *Na wa*. Not anti 'queer' *o*... it's just that the issue is being forced into narratives that maybe a tad forced and contrived to fit the bill... just my thoughts *o*... I'm not right nor am I wrong... it's all love" (Lagos Space Programme Instagram, n.d.). Despite this critique, the brand persistently reveals through fashion a narrative of individuals who actually walk the streets of Lagos, rather than an imagined notion that queer lives and masculinities are non-existent in this sociocultural space.

In multiple collections, the Lagos Space Programme has intentionally melded influences drawn from diverse sources as expressed in one of their manifestos: "we will always state our references, we will never be ashamed of this" (Lagos Space Programme Instagram 2018). Mixing British tailoring with Yoruba heritages from the *Ojude Oba* festival, the *Gẹlẹdẹ́* [3] ceremony, the *oríkì* concept, and the *adire* resist dye technique which has appeared multiple times in the collections– are examples of drawing of this eclectic approach. These ideas demonstrate how "queer communities share their stories and messages through languages, symbols, and gestures unique to their groups" as stated in relation to Project 8: *Cloth as queer archive*.

In Project 4: *Gurreilla*, Thompson drew inspiration from the life of the late African-American composer Julius Eastman, particularly his identity as a black, queer man grappling with addiction and mental health issues. Eastman was known for giving provocative titles to his compositions such as *Evil Nigger* and *Gay Guerrilla*. The title of *Gurreilla*/ Project 4, even with its different spelling, clearly references Eastman's music. The inspiration for this collection was also informed by a 1980 Eastman interview with Marie Cieri. In the interview, the composer uses the Tibetan saint Milarepa as an example to explain how certain ways of dressing can be perceived as provocative by some:

> And I think the thing to do is to always think 'what is the most natural thing.' You know, like Milarepa, he used to go around with his prick showing because he had his little, he was, you know, a Tibetan saint, you know, and he had, his clothes were just torn so he only wore one thing. So it was torn and people would say, 'Oh my god, you poor thing. Why don't you dress up?' But he said, 'You know, there's nothing wrong with my prick.' It's just natural, he said, that people are ashamed of things that they oughtn't be ashamed of. So, in that way, he was really outside of the norm. But in reality, he was just being natural.

We were especially drawn to a fashion look modelled by Eze Michael. Similar to Eastman's minimalist musical compositions, this look from the collection featured clean lines and depicts provocative necklines that exposed parts of the male body, such as the neck, back, and shoulders, traditionally hidden in menswear in Nigeria. Thompson's collection positions Eastman as a vessel through which the male body deliberately disturbs expectations of menswear in Lagos and the broader context, thereby pluralising masculinity.

Project 5: *Aṣọ Lànkí, Kí Ató Ki Ènìyàn* takes its name from a Yoruba proverb that translates to 'we greet dress before we greet its wearer', an apt title that reflects the now widely accepted theory of fashion as a visual language and form of expression (Barnard 2002; Deplu 2015; Hopkins 2021; Kaiser & Green 2022; Loureiro 2022). The collection was launched at Arise Fashion Week

and later, in the same year, showcased in the fashion film *Aso: Fashion as visual oríkì* at Milan Fashion Week. Composed of indigo blue, brown, and grey as the prominent colour palette with hints of white, this collection was accessorised with leather and python skin platform mules in black, off-white, and brown with indigo-blue silk in soles. Brass jewellery and sculptural pieces hand-cast in Benin City were additional accessories. The fashion included, among others, reversible Yoruba wrapper skirts styled in layers of twos or threes. There were also wide-legged trousers with drawstring waists and a stylised venture vest with cut-out details. As in previous collections, Thompson also explored knitwear, with some designed to resemble masks by covering the entire faces of models. As the collection's title indicates, fashion communicates queer artistic production within this African context. The combined use of the textiles and techniques shows Thompson depicting a fashioned body that reflects a plurality of masculinities. To dissect the communicative power of this collection, we pay close attention to one item: the masks.

The Lagos Space Programme posted on its official *Instagram* page "Dan Mask" (1989), a work by deceased Nigerian photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, as a reference image. Fani-Kayode's work addresses personal tensions between his Yoruba upbringing, race, and homosexuality. This photographic work features a dreadlocked black male who is obscured as he holds a mask from the Dan ethnic group. Fani-Kayode's work is semi-autobiographical in its references to sexuality, race, subjecthood, and spirituality. Thompson's work is described as "dissecting the intersection of Thompson's life experiences, thereby communicating ideas of individuality, and proposing new ways to understand beauty" (Fashion Trust Arabia n.d). Like Fani-Kayode, Thompson links the mask to queerness in an innovative way. In the Prigent interview, Thompson explains that the masks in the Project 5 collection were inspired by the ritual masquerades of the *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* ceremony which is visually known for its array of masks. Below, we contextualise this ceremony by providing a brief background, followed by our analysis of Thompson's incorporation of the ceremony's multiple ideas to reconstruct and queer masculinities.

The *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* tradition has been the subject of academic discourse by numerous scholars (including Drewal & Drewal 1990; Lawal 1996; Cameron 1998; Miller 2001; Bentor 2002; Andrew 2014; Willis 2018). The *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* community masquerade is practiced by the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria including the Ọhọri, Ifọnyin, Ketu, Ibarapa, Ẹgbado, Awori, Anago, and Ṣabe subgroups (Drewal and Drewal 1990:7). Historical records indicate that it was also practiced in the Republic of Benin, Cuba, Sierra Leone, and Brazil (Willis 2018, p.42). In his seminal text *The Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ Spectacle*, Lawal (1996, p.xiii) notes that by combining dance, art, songs, and satire, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* performances "are meant to promote the social and spiritual well-being of a given community." It is primarily known for honouring and celebrating the power of the matriarch and deified foremother i.e., Ìyà *Nl*à - 'The Great Mother' (Drewal and Drewal 1990, p.7). The Ìyà *Nl*à principle aligns with its message of peace asserting that "human beings can relate to one another as children of the same mother and so think less of malicious acts" (Lawal 1996, p.xiv). During the practice, the celebrated female figure is embodied by men, a topic also discussed by Thompson when explaining the research for their collection.

The masquerade performance features a masked performer who is accompanied by dancers, drummers, and singers. The performer wears a carved wooden mask resembling a female figure, metal anklet rattles, and a garb made of various coloured and patterned fabric panels and raffia (Willis 2018, p.12).[4] As a means of expressing the spiritual, aesthetic, performative, emotional, and social, Willis asserts that *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́*:

> offered people an opportunity to comment on the world around them. As a masquerade geared toward appeasement, conciliation, and recognition of the diversity of the groups [...] *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* offered a medium for celebrating diversity and channeling it toward solidarity. (2018, p.108)

Doubling is another defining feature of *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* in two distinctive ways. Firstly, doubling manifests in the performances which are divided into the nighttime *Ẹfẹ* performance and the daytime *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* performance, "one cannot take place without the other" (Drewal and Drewal 1990, p.11). Secondly, the "singing male masquerader, *Oro*

Efè, must be preceded by a partner, either male or female, who is viewed as a companion, wife, or twin. In *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́*, masqueraders traditionally perform in identical pairs" (Drewal and Drewal 1990, p.11). Thompson explores the idea that the *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* ceremony celebrates matriarchy, even though the performance is embodied by men, which they refer to as the gender-bending aspect of the ceremony. Notably, in an earlier scholarly work, Miller (2001) focuses on the aspect of doubling and embodiment, calling it cross-dressing. Thompson connects the *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́*'s spirit of conciliation and recognition of diversity and uses the term gender-bending as a queer element in the fashion collection. Thompson comments on the limitations of confining masculine identity to a singular and essentialised sartorial expression. Through the Lagos Space Programme, Adeju Thompson proposes plural masculinities through fashion, reconstructing and queering these identities.

The Lagos Space Programme explains the supporting film, *Fashion as visual oríkì*, as beginning with an understanding of "*oríkì* [as] a form of citation poetry, [but] a visual form of *oríkì*, as the arrangement of patterns, colours, shapes, and textures on a figure can cohere into a powerful gestalt form - a 'look' - that can trigger an affective response in the perceiver." We are drawn to the arrangement of different visual forms to evoke an affective response. Pereira asserts that when writing about queer lives in the global South, "we must think of the affects and affectations that can dislocate these universalising and far-removed theories toward local histories. *Queer* [emphasis in original] theory would then be affected and reconfigured in processes of translation brought about by these other-experiences" (2019, p.44). This assertion is important as we observe Thompson making use of what can be defined as traditional Nigerian techniques and garments like *adire*, brass works, and wrapper skirts, expressed through concepts that connect the designer and other queer people such as Eastman and Fani-Kayode. By referencing these individuals in works of fashion, Thompson offers a visual *oríkì*, a poetic intertextual reference that illustrates how their ideas responded to Eastman and Fani-Kayode's works, who like Thompson, used queerness, identity, and history as themes.

Although not centred around queer icons, Project 8: *Cloth as a queer archive* explores the concept that ties "together Yoruba heritage, Eurocentric dress codes with playful queer iconography in a marriage of traditional and contemporary" (Lagos Space Programme 2023). Its accompanying fashion film *'come to me, i'm already here'* was shot at the Sacred Art School in Osogbo by filmmaker Isabel Okoro. This film aligns closely with the collection as it "plays on the idea of continuously returning to yourself, a concept central to queer being" (Lagos Space Programme 2023). The project's title demonstrates how queer archives inform contemporary fashion in this Lagosian context. It continues the archiving process focused on the queering of masculinities. This echoes a point made in the African LGBTI declaration that states "reclaiming and sharing our stories (past and present, our lived realities, our contributions to society and our hopes for the future" (African LGBTI Manifesto/Declaration 2010 n.d).

> "The wrapper skirt is worn by both men and women in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria."

The strength of the Lagos Space Programme's crafting of African queer expressions, what we describe as queer and plural masculinities in the Lagosian context, cleverly aligns the concept, with the visual and the sartorial. Styling the looks for the photoshoot of Project 5: *Aṣọ Lànkí, Kí Ató Ki Ènìyàn* is worth discussing. One of the more striking images on *Instagram* shows model Seun Akinyosoye in a soft pose, cross-legged, sitting next to a *Jojo* tank with his face at a three-quarter angle and eyes looking away from the camera. Akinyosoye wears a reversible indigo blue wrapper skirt and a hand-knotted wool vest. The neckline of the vest is so low that it delicately exposes the chest. Exposing certain features of the body through style lines, as Thompson does, is a recurring theme in their work.

Brass accessories feature prominently including rings, bangles, armbands, and a more experimental piece that resembles the brim of a cap. The wrapper skirt is worn by both men and women in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria. In styling the look, Thompson demonstrates an awareness of the body as an active participant in rethinking certain notions of masculinity and reconstructing them into new expressions of masculinities. As Kaiser and Green assert "the body is not a passive medium that reflects an essence, but rather actively negotiates and performs sexual subjectivities through style-fashion-dress" (2022, p.243).

Thompson writes about Project 7: *Post-Adire* that the technique employed by the Lagos Space Programme takes from *adire* as a mode of storytelling through resist dye techniques on textiles adding further that

> I was intrigued by the idea behind this process, wearing stories on one's body. I wanted to explore Adire in a contemporary way, so I developed my own process I call 'Post-Adire'; an opportunity for me to push Adire dyeing techniques into new contexts like knitwear and creating motifs that are important for me (https://www.instagram.com/lagosspaceprogramme/).

Over the years, Thompson's work and exploration of ideas in the different fashion projects demonstrate the fashion designer as a producer and a commentator on society and its manifestations. This case study examines a fashion designer who, through a persistent attitude, showcases an African queer voice shaping the landscape by highlighting the power of the visual and sartorial in presenting queer identities.

Multivalent Alternatives to Re/constructing Masculinities through African Fashion

The various projects from the Lagos Space Programme analysed in the previous section hold the potential to spark new conversations about reconstructing gender expression by challenging binaries through sartoriality. One factor that reinforces the dichotomy between sexes is the issue of bivalence, which is rooted in Aristotelian logic.[5] This kind of engagement positions society in opposition and structures reality accordingly. It is this same logic that defines the opposite of white as black, creates right-wrong distinction, and categorises male-female, among others. Using the male-female binary can be problematic for several reasons. Such categorisation amplifies gender as a non-fluid concept and excludes any identities that do not fit within this binary. The male-female distinction is more relevant in forming multivalent logical alternatives. This is because multivalent alternatives acknowledge the existence of binaries while also allowing for complementary relationships. Thus, under multivalent logics that differ from Aristotelian logic, male and female cannot be confined to a binary.

In this context, amid persecution, some fashion enthusiasts and designers, such as Thompson, have taken bold steps to incorporate gender-neutral fashion in their collections. Whether the increasing prominence of queer fashion in Nigeria can serve as a catalyst for societal change and help reformulate perceptions of gender and sexuality remains to be seen. Queer fashion has the potential to provide a platform for marginalised voices to engage in activism that could lead to social change within Nigeria.

Conclusion

The differences in identitarian forms associated with gender align with fashion expressions in the context of queer(ing) fashion. We focused on the Lagos Space Programme and the new ideas their fashion styles introduced in Nigeria. Nigeria is certainly not isolated from the rest of the world. While projecting values and norms to validate their identity, there must be awareness of other societies that may be adversely affected when a particular masculine identity is upheld. Some traditional practices should be completely overhauled if they impede development, as not all changes in values and norms lead to negative outcomes for adapting societies. Africa is also connected to the rest of the world and every society should be open to adapting changes that are not inherently harmful, as they may bring new possibilities. In this light, different disciplines approaching masculinity from their various perspectives conclude that perceptions of the male and female genders have been marked by biases. Furthermore, because gender is a social construct, the perception of gender expressiveness should be flexible. Therefore, maleness and masculinity are not antithetical to queerness, as these should not be seen as binary forms, especially among some African cultures where both can intersect depending on the individual preferences of each person.

Notes

1 The topic of challenging the misguided notion that delinks queerness and African identities has been studied previously (See for example, Gevisser and Cameron 1994; Livermon 2012; Ekine 2013; Ekine and Abbas 2013; Ossome 2013; Matebeni 2014).

2 We acknowledge the scarcity of literature that speaks directly to Lagosian masculinities. However, we have made references to some sources that speak to masculinity, especially in western parts of Nigeria where Lagos is located (see Olawoye et al, 2019; Chigbu, 2019).

3 It is important to clarify our use of text. In their studies, Cameron (1998), Miller (2001), Bentor (2002), and Willis (2018) consistently capitalise the word Gelede without any special characters. Andrew (2014) adopts a similar style but uses it in italic form (*Gelede*). Lawal (1996), an insider to the *Gẹlẹdẹ́* ceremony, writes the word using Álífábẹ̀ẹ̀tì Yorùbá. For this article, we adopt this writing style when referencing the word and also apply the italic format. This also applies to other words from the Yoruba language used in this article.

4 We recommend that those interested in a more comprehensive history and origin of the Gẹlẹdé masquerade read *The Gẹlẹdé spectacle, embodying the sacred in Yoruba art* by Babatunde Lawal (1996) and *Masquerading politics: kinship, gender, and ethnicity in a Youruba town* by John Thabiti Willis (2018).

5 See Jonathan Chimakonam, *Ezumezu: A System of Logic for African Philosophy and Studies*. (Cham: Springer 2019), pp. 151-152; Derek Cabrera and Laura Cabrera, *Systems Thinking Made Simple: New Hope for Solving Wicked Problems*. (Plectica Publishing, 2015), pp. 126-129.

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