

Challenges of the modernization and industrialization of the manufacture of Ndop fabric from Cameroon

Abstract

The Ndop fabric is part of the material witnesses of Cameroonian living culture like the Faso Dan Fani of Burkina Faso, like the shuka of the Massai of Kenya and Tanzania. These symbolic fabrics have a highly significant cultural and heritage dimension in their community. The promotion of these traditional African garments and the modernization of ancestral manufacturing techniques have for several decades contributed to the development of the continent's textile industry. The proliferation of ancient and modern traditional styles testifies the impact of the industrialization of the sector on the economy and on local cultures. These transformations certainly bring added value to the economy, but they have a strong impact on the value and cultural dimension of the fabric. In a global context where it is necessary to develop this sector of the local African textile industry, it is necessary to find means and possibilities which promote the emergence of African fashion by giving pride of place to the conservation and preservation of originality of these fabrics which are elements of the national cultural heritage. The decline in the symbolic and cultural value of these fabrics prompts profound reflections on the manner and means of its production and of its current use.

Keywords: Ndop, textile, modernization, industrialization, symbolic value, cultural value

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Introduction

In a process of reclaiming its culture and asserting its identity, African youth have been active for several years in the preservation and enhancement of traditional African fabrics and outfits. The Ndop from Cameroon, the Faso Dan Fani from Burkina Faso and the Shuka from the Massai of East Africa are the fabrics of choice sought by innovative African youth. These fabrics have a strong symbolic value in their respective communities. They have been and become over the years, one of the main identity elements of young Africans who work to bring added value to African clothing art. These new clothing habits inevitably have an impact on the local African textile industry sector. The modernization and industrialization of local African textile industries obey the will of this innovative African youth who, in their opportunities, creates all kinds of models with these symbolic fabrics. These new creations certainly revolutionize the sector of traditional African clothing, but in some cases desacralize the symbolic dimension of these fabrics. Methodically thought out, it is quite possible to revolutionize this sector without undermining the symbolic or heritage value of fabrics. We have discussed globally three of the greatest traditional African fabrics with strong symbolic and identity value. But we are going to devote the development of this article to the Ndop fabric of Cameroon. The main objective of this work is to raise awareness for the consideration of the Ndop as an important element of the Cameroonian national heritage. We wish by this work, to suggest and discuss on the means and possibilities which allow the harmonization of the development of the industry of the Ndop with the conservation of its patrimonial value. We also wish to challenge the Cameroonian authorities on the need to adopt legislation that would protect the Ndop. The result of this work depends on the methodology of our research, which consisted of conducting field surveys of traditional craftsmen and textile industries that produce Ndop, fashion designers and Ndop users. The data collected during the surveys was enriched by physical and digital documentation.

What is Ndop?

Ndop is a traditional Cameroonian fabric made from cotton and dyed with indigo. It is a set of cotton strips sewn edge to edge. It is decorated with signs and symbols using over stitching. Several geometric and zoomorphic figures enrich the decoration of the Ndop and justify its symbolic value. Ndop is native to the Grass Field regions of Cameroon (west and north-west). It is one of the major identity elements of the peoples of the Grass Fields of Cameroon. The Ndop is among the various traditional Cameroonian fabrics, even African one of the richest in meaning. It is used to make special outfits reserved for a certain category of people. This fabric has a very special symbolic value. It is the ritual garment par excellence of secret societies. The first Ndop would be made since the 16th century. It was in the 17th century that the Ndop technique was improved to reach its current form. There are two variants of Ndop in Cameroon: The Ndop with a blue background from the Bamileke peoples of the west, the one with a purple background from the North West and south west of Cameroon. These two variants are distinguished by the dyeing, the over stitching of the raffia, the type and the invoice of the drawings. The Ndop of the western region of Cameroon is remarkable for the richness and almost abstract stylization of the motifs that stand out against the intense blue background and for their combination (Figures 1–3).

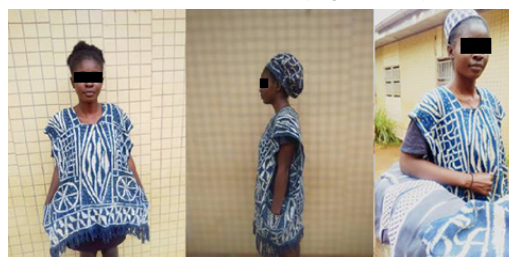


Figure 1 Princess of the west region of Cameroon dressed in Ndop (Kaji 2023).



Figure 2 King of the Bapa in western Cameroon dressed in the Ndop, with his attributes of power (Kaji 2018).



Figure 3 Princess and prince Babungo in the Northwest of Cameroon. The woman is dressed in the Ndop at the purple background (Kaji 2017).

Ndop manufacturing

The Ndop is made of cotton, made of narrow strips sewn edge to edge, and decorated with characteristic white designs on an indigo blue background. It is thus embellished with geometric figures such as the diamond, which recalls the female sex and refers to fertility and motherhood; circles, moon, sun, stars, etc. The zoomorphic figures represented are often the tarantula, the toad, the lizard, which carry messages of peace, fertility and prosperity. The Ndop decoration technique is substantially the same as that used by Javanese artists for the realization of some of their batiks. On a white cotton fabric woven in northern Cameroon, the artist first traces drawings in black, in order to reserve the whites. "He performs a kind of embroidery with raffia threads, sewn and tightly tightened so as not to let any drop of dye through when the fabric, thus prepared, is immersed in a vat of indigo; the reserve threads are then This process has, over that of Java, where the reserves are obtained by applying liquid wax, the advantage of avoiding cracks. The patterns of the Ndop constitute a real book where one can follow the message the embroiderer by means of signs the artist is convinced that skill and talent in the execution of the designs will make them more effective in their functional role.

Use of Ndop

The Ndop fabric is used to make the ceremonial and ritual outfits of kings, notables, priests of religious and customary ceremonies. Beyond the artistic, cultural and commercial dimension of the product, the Ndop has a relationship with death, it symbolizes mourning, the beyond, the invisible world. It even serves as a shroud to wrap the remains of the king or a notable. Large strips of Ndop are used to decorate mourning sites and the seats of kings among the Grass Field

peoples of Cameroon. In the Grass Fields regions of Cameroon, the Ndop was originally reserved for the *fo or fon* (king) and notables in general.¹ Today, princes and princesses, queen mothers and other ordinary people use the Ndop on festive occasions or during funeral ceremonies. A band of Ndop worn around the neck or tied at the waist is a sign of misfortune among the peoples of western Cameroon. In this region of Cameroon, and according to tradition, certain members of the family of a deceased must always wear the Ndop to signify the circumstance of misfortune that is experiencing them. This use of Ndop is common to all Grass Field regions of Cameroon. The style and color of the Ndop may vary by region but the use and function remain unchanged.

Modernization and desacralization of Ndop

With the technological evolution, the Ndop is manufactured on a large scale. The Ndop which was initially marketed only by kings is now sold by everyone.² It is found in supermarkets in the form of Wax loincloth, evening wear, artistic stage outfits, hats, scarves, bags, etc. All these products have given the opportunity to some young African fashion designers to revolutionize the Ndop and develop their brand. The proliferation of clothing models based on Ndop also favors the design of accessories of all kinds with the counterfeiting of the product. Counterfeit Ndop totally loses its artistic and cultural value. The symbolic and spiritual dimension of the product is gone. Here the fabric is no longer original. It is a copy that no longer respects the original principles and production techniques. Like the French firm HERMES, which has been creating some of its models with Ndop for several years, there are companies that develop and modernize Ndop fabric while retaining its originality. But the fact remains that the mercantile appetites of these companies do not highlight the historical and heritage dimension of this fabric. The highlighting by most craftsmen of the market value of the Ndop is also at the origin of its desacralization (Sonkeng, Kouosseu 2020). We thus miss the purpose of the Ndop to provide pleasure to the dignitaries and by affirming the authority of the king (Malabon 2016). This carelessness in the production and counterfeiting of Ndop is attributable to the State of Cameroon which has not yet created a legal framework for the protection of Ndop.

Discussion

All the taboos around the Ndop are now being broken down by fashion designers. In Cameroon as elsewhere, the use of the Ndop is no longer reserved for a class of distinguished people in society. The Ndop is now used and worn by everyone: today it decorates places of shows, living rooms, vehicle seats etc...these new uses of the Ndop are imposed by the current context of the international market which favors the development of textile industries and creates jobs. Faced with economic and development issues, we cannot oppose this popularization of the Ndop. The modernization and industrialization of the Ndop are therefore an accompaniment to the development initiatives of the Cameroonian economy. The situation simply recommends at the level of economic and industrial operators in the textile sector, particular attention with regard to the preservation and conservation of the sacred character and the cultural and symbolic dimension of Ndop. It is desirable in these conditions that any work on the Ndop emphasizes the originality of the materials that go into its manufacture on an industrial scale. This concern about the preservation and conservation of the heritage dimension of the Ndop is a challenge to the State of Cameroon, which must play a leading role in the standardization of the production of the Ndop and the regulation of its market.³⁻¹³

Conclusion

Like Burkina Faso, which established Faso Dan Fani as a national heritage at the end of the 1980s, Cameroon must adopt legislation that protects Ndop and regulates its production. The protection of the Ndop would be a real legal weapon against the actors of the counterfeiting of this symbolic fabric. The legal framework can normalize the industrial production of the Ndop and bring in foreign exchange to the national treasury. The State of Cameroon must also create and develop arts and crafts centers to popularize the ancestral and original techniques of Ndop production. It must also subsidize the craftsmen of the local communities who produce the Ndop in order to perpetuate the tradition of this historic art of Cameroon.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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