

Technological Evolution of Women's Clothing in the Democratic Republic of Congo : A Reflection of Social and Cultural Transformations

Angèle Landu Lutonadio¹

¹Assistant at the Faculty of Letters and Arts at ISETAM,
Specialist in Tailoring, Design, and Haute Couture Pattern Innovation

Publication Date: 2025/11/05

Abstract: Clothing is never neutral. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women's fashion has consistently gone beyond its utilitarian role to serve as a powerful expression of identity, social belonging, and cultural resistance. This study examines the technological evolution of women's clothing as a reflection of the country's social and cultural transformations, from the precolonial era to the current globalized context.

Grounded in a multidisciplinary approach and inspired by semiotic theory particularly Roland Barthes' concept of clothing as a system of signs this research highlights how garments, textiles, hairstyles, and accessories symbolically express specific historical periods, social status, and ideological positions. The evolution of dress among Congolese women reveals shifting gender roles, resistance to colonial and patriarchal systems, and efforts toward cultural reassertion and self-affirmation.

Far from being merely aesthetic, the transformation of women's clothing is embedded in broader historical dynamics marked by the tension between tradition and modernity, domination and emancipation. Understanding this evolution provides valuable insight into the strategies of adaptation, creativity, and social positioning employed by Congolese women as they navigate changing social realities.

Keywords : *Women's Clothing, Technological Evolution, Social Transformations, Fashion and Society.*

How to Cite: Angèle Landu Lutonadio (2025) Technological Evolution of Women's Clothing in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Reflection of Social and Cultural Transformations. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(10), 2388-2392. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25oct676>

I. INTRODUCTION

➤ *Women's Clothing as a Total Social Fact*

In the African context, women's clothing goes beyond the mere function of covering the body: it embodies a symbolic language, an identity marker, and a field of negotiation between tradition, modernity, and globalization. According to Jean-Bernard Ouedraogo (2001), it plays a central role in the dynamics of modernity and authenticity, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where clothing is both a reference to the past and a tool for anchoring oneself in contemporaneity.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, ethnographic studies by Biebuyck (1973) and Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002) highlight the importance of ritual attire before colonization. Made from raffia, bark, or adorned with beads, these garments fulfilled social, religious, and political functions. They expressed a communal and cosmological logic, marking

membership in a lineage, an initiation, or a status within the social hierarchy.

The colonial period constitutes a decisive rupture. Historians such as Jules Marchal (1993) and Nancy Rose Hunt (1999) have documented the imposition of European dress models by religious missions and the Belgian administration. This forced Westernization marginalized traditional clothing practices, while also generating cultural hybridization phenomena, especially among urban women, as observed by Gondola (1999).

From independence onward, the authenticity policies implemented under Mobutu's regime contributed to a symbolic reappropriation of the *pagne* and African textiles. For Tshionza (2011), this cultural reaffirmation strengthened the role of women as bearers of national identity through their clothing choices.

In the context of contemporary globalization, these dynamics become more complex. The tensions between global uniformity and local creativity are analyzed by authors like Sylvie Octobre and Yinka Shonibare (2010), who highlight the emergence of African designers reinventing textiles such as wax, kitenge, or liputa, in a rooted modernity approach.

Finally, recent studies (notably Bikienga, 2019 ; Makiese, 2022) examine clothing as a space for identity negotiation for Congolese women, caught between religious norms, feminist claims, and social pressures. Clothing thus becomes a political act, a tool for personal expression, and even a form of resistance and power in the public sphere.

➤ *Technological Evolution*

As globalization intensifies, women's clothing in the Democratic Republic of Congo undergoes a profound transformation, marked by technological evolution on several levels: innovations in textile production, the influence of digital media, and the expansion of style distribution networks. This phenomenon affects not only the materiality of clothing but also their social, symbolic, and political functions.

- *Style Technologies and Cultural Hybridization*

New communication technologies, especially social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), play a central role in the rapid circulation of global fashion trends. Young Congolese women adopt Western stylistic codes—skinny jeans, crop tops, evening dresses—but reinterpret them locally through traditional elements such as wax, Liputa, or Kitenge fabrics. This stylistic fusion exemplifies what Homi Bhabha calls the “third cultural space,” a hybrid zone between the global and the local.

- *Globalization and Identity Reinvention*

Contrary to the idea of simple cultural homogenization, globalization encourages localized stylistic creativity. Congolese designers are emerging on the Pan-African and international scenes, offering collections that integrate ancestral motifs into modern cuts. Clothing becomes a tool for identity storytelling, at the crossroads of personal history, ethnic traditions, and cosmopolitan aspirations.

- *Social Tensions and Symbolic Negotiations*

This technological evolution is not neutral: it generates tensions within the social space, especially regarding norms of decency, modesty, and legitimate femininity. In religious and conservative circles, certain modern clothing styles are perceived as provocative or contrary to “African values.” In response, many women use fashion as a tool for empowerment, normative resistance, and repositioning within the public sphere.

- *Clothing as a Technological and Political Tool*

If we adopt a broad understanding of technology as the set of means used to transform material and produce meaning, then Congolese women's clothing becomes a genuine technological artifact. It materializes political, identity, and cultural choices negotiated daily. This perspective aligns with

the work of researchers like Yinka Shonibare, who use textiles to explore the relationships between colonial history, globalization, and postcolonial subjectivity.

➤ *Social Transformations*

The technological evolution of women's clothing in the Congolese context represents a major innovation, whose impact is felt across generations. In the era of globalization and digital technologies, clothing becomes a dynamic space of dialogue between tradition and modernity (Nsapu, 2015). This process can be observed both in textile production methods and in the modes of stylistic diffusion, largely influenced by media, social networks, and the Congolese diaspora.

Young Congolese women, especially in urban areas, navigate between globalized fashion trends skinny jeans, crop tops, Western dresses and a reappropriation of cultural identities through modernized African dresses, wax or liputa evening wear, or hybrid creations blending traditional pagne with contemporary tailoring. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and urban music videos have become real showcases of fashion creativity, where a confident femininity is expressed, rooted in both local and global aesthetics.

However, this dynamic of innovation is accompanied by social and cultural tensions. The emergence of new forms of stylistic expression sparks debates within religious, political, and community spheres, particularly in conservative environments where some outfits are perceived as provocative or contradictory to “traditional values.” In response, many Congolese women invest clothing as a tool for identity assertion, empowerment, and freedom of expression.

Thus, far from reflecting simple cultural homogenization, the technological evolution of clothing in the DRC contributes to a continuous reinvention of Congolese female style. This process, situated at the crossroads of cultures, reveals a capacity for adaptation, creation, and subversion, where technology in its broadest sense becomes a mediation between cultural heritage and contemporary aspirations.

➤ *Fashion and Society*

Fashion is not limited to a succession of styles or fleeting trends : it is deeply rooted in social dynamics, cultural structures, and power relations. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women's fashion serves as a mirror of social transformations while also acting as a means of agency and expression within society.

According to Roland Barthes (1967), clothing is a system of signs comparable to language, encoding messages related to social class, gender, culture, or era. This semiotic perspective allows fashion to be analyzed as a total social fact both a tool of communication, distinction, and contestation. It is particularly relevant in the Congolese context, where women's clothing crystallizes issues of social status, respectability, normative femininity, and social mobility.

As Jean-Bernard Ouedraogo (2001) emphasizes, in Africa, women's clothing is at the heart of a constant tension between modernity and authenticity. This tension manifests in wardrobe choices that reflect belonging to a local culture while integrating global codes. Thus, wearing a Western dress, a suit, or a wax fabric ensemble is not only an aesthetic preference but also signals a social positioning or adherence to certain values.

In the DRC, women's fashion is closely linked to social visibility. It serves to mark success, respectability, or aspiration toward a certain model of modernity. During public ceremonies, weddings, religious services, or political events, the outfits worn testify to symbolic capital that women invest in carefully. This function of self-staging in the public space, observed by Gondola (1999), shows that women's fashion plays an active role in constructing social status and in reproducing or subverting gender norms.

Finally, fashion can also become a space of resistance. Faced with rigid norms often patriarchal or religious some Congolese women use their clothing as a language of protest or individual assertion. They reinterpret traditional codes to affirm presence, autonomy, or refusal to be invisibilized.

II. METHOD AND MATERIALS

As part of this study conducted in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, we adopted an ethnosociological approach inspired by the work of Georges Lapassade. This method, at the crossroads of sociology and ethnography, allows for the analysis of social phenomena based on direct observation, interactions, and the discourse of the actors involved.

This approach proved particularly relevant for understanding the technological evolution of women's clothing as a total social fact, involving cultural, identity-related, economic, and symbolic dimensions. It enables us to grasp the subjective logic behind dressing practices, as well as the accompanying social representations, within a changing urban context.

➤ Research Field

The study was conducted in several communes of Kinshasa, notably Gombe, Limete, Kasa-Vubu, and Matete, in order to diversify the sociocultural profiles of the participants. These areas were chosen for their dynamism in women's fashion and their varying exposure to global influences.

➤ Sampling and Participants

For this research, a non-probabilistic sample was formed using purposive sampling, allowing us to target profiles directly involved in the practices and perceptions of women's clothing in Kinshasa. The sample consists of 50 individuals, selected based on their active or symbolic role within the urban Congolese fashion and textile scene.

The categories of participants are as follows:

- Local fashion designers working in tailoring workshops or independent design houses, engaged in creating garments that combine tradition and modernity;
- Consumers of both modern and traditional clothing, aged 18 to 55, from different neighborhoods of Kinshasa, representing a diversity of socio-economic and generational profiles ;
- Sellers of pagnes and contemporary clothing, primarily operating in key commercial locations such as the Central Market, the Marché de la Liberté, and other popular markets in the capital ;
- Opinion leaders in the fashion field, including bloggers, digital influencers, as well as heads of fashion houses, who have a strong presence on social media or in local media.

This diversity of profiles enabled the collection of varied viewpoints, the observation of practices in real-life contexts, and the analysis of interactions between actors in the clothing sector from sociocultural and technological perspectives.

➤ Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through:

- Semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring individual and collective perceptions of clothing;
- Field observations, notably during social events (weddings, religious services, public gatherings) ;
- Analysis of digital content (Instagram posts, TikTok videos, Congolese music clips) to understand current media and aesthetic influences.

➤ Data Processing and Analysis

Qualitative data were processed using thematic analysis, focusing on symbolic motifs, identity discourses, and relationships to modernity. The goal was to uncover the social logics underlying clothing choices by cross-referencing individual, community, and cultural levels.

III. RESULTS

➤ Perspectives on Technological Evolution in the Digital Era in the Field of Clothing

The analysis of data collected in Kinshasa shows that the technological evolution of women's clothing in the Democratic Republic of Congo goes beyond purely aesthetic or material transformations. It reveals a set of social, economic, symbolic, and identity mutations deeply influenced by the digital revolution. The results highlight several structuring dynamics.

• Digitization of Fashion and New Visibility Channels

One major observed development concerns the digitization of fashion. Many Congolese stylists and designers now use social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) to showcase their creations, replacing traditional marketing channels. This digital exposure increases their visibility, facilitates access to diaspora clientele, and contributes to the promotion of a hybrid

Congolese style that combines traditional elements (wax, pagne, liputa) with contemporary cuts.

- *Technology-Assisted Creation*

The rise of digital design tools (textile design software, 3D modeling applications, e-commerce platforms) offers new opportunities to local actors. Some tailoring workshops in Kinshasa are beginning to integrate computer-assisted creation processes, enabling faster and more demand-adapted production. Although this transition remains marginal, it presents a promising outlook for light industrialization in the women's clothing sector.

- *Hybridization of Styles and Circulation of Influences*

Thanks to the rapid circulation of digital content, young Congolese women are exposed to a multitude of cultural references: Western fashion, Afro-urban aesthetics, South Korean or American influences. This circulation of influences results in a stylistic hybridization visible on the streets, at social events, and on digital platforms. Fashion thus becomes both a space for individual creativity and a tool for social repositioning.

This phenomenon illustrates what Appadurai (1996) called "global cultural flows," where local practices incorporate global models while adapting them to their specific context.

- *Challenges Related to Technological Accessibility*

Despite these advances, several structural constraints hinder the full adoption of digital technologies in the clothing sector:

- Limited Internet access in some peripheral neighborhoods,
- High costs of computer-assisted sewing equipment or smartphones,
- The digital divide between generations or social groups.

These limitations highlight the importance of public policies that promote digital training, support creative entrepreneurship, and improve technological infrastructure.

- *Towards a Reconfiguration of the Relationship to Clothing*

Finally, technological evolution is reshaping the social function of clothing. Clothing ceases to be solely a symbol of belonging and becomes a vehicle for self-expression, identity assertion, and even activism (feminist, ecological, cultural). Several young women interviewed stated that they use their clothing to assert autonomy, challenge norms, or express political stances through aesthetic choices.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results show that Congolese women's clothing, far from being a mere fashion trend, constitutes a strategic arena where the relationships between technology, identity, power, and society are played out. The digital era offers new opportunities for innovation, dissemination, and self-affirmation, while also posing challenges related to

inequality, preservation of local knowledge, and management of cultural tensions.

This transformation calls for greater recognition of the social and economic potential of fashion as a rapidly growing creative sector in the DRC, as well as a living mirror of contemporary cultural changes.

V. CONCLUSION

The technological evolution of women's clothing in the Democratic Republic of Congo reveals a complex phenomenon intertwining aesthetics, identity, and social power. Far from being a mere fashion issue, clothing constitutes a changing social language that reflects the deep dynamics of Congolese society.

From traditional practices and symbolic functions to contemporary expressions influenced by globalization and digital technology, women's clothing remains a tool for affirmation, resistance, and cultural adaptation. Social networks and online commerce are reshaping clothing practices, intensifying tensions between traditional norms and individual freedoms.

In Kinshasa, clothing is a space of identity negotiation where cultural heritage, modern aspirations, and global influences intersect. It reflects social transformations related to gender, social mobility, female empowerment, and the local creative economy.

However, unequal access to technology and the challenges of preserving traditional skills pose difficulties in the face of risks of cultural homogenization.

Thus, women's clothing in the DRC in the digital age is a key indicator of social change and a field of political and cultural action. It is crucial that public policies support local creation, professional training, and access to digital tools in order to enhance this transformative potential.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Barthes, R. (1967). *Système de la mode*. Paris : Seuil.
- [2]. Hunt, N. R. (1999). *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo*. Duke University Press.
- [3]. Ouedraogo, J.-B. (2001). *Habiller l'Afrique. Sociologie des apparences sociales*. L'Harmattan.
- [4]. Tshiunza, K. (2011). *Corps, esthétique et identité dans la mode congolaise*. Université de Kinshasa.
- [5]. Gondola, C. D. (1999). *Villes miroirs : Migrations et identités urbaines à Kinshasa et Brazzaville*. L'Harmattan.
- [6]. Bikienga, L. (2019). *Femmes et modes vestimentaires en Afrique centrale*. Presses universitaires de Yaoundé.
- [7]. Makiese, M. (2022). *La mode au Congo : entre créativité, résistances et globalisation*. Mémoire de master, Université de Lubumbashi.
- [8]. Eicher, J. B. (1995). *Dress and Identity in Africa*. International Textiles and Apparel Association.

- [9]. Njami, S. (2011). *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*. Prestel Publishing.
- [10]. Mbembe, A. (2000). *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press.
- [11]. Arnold, D. (2008). *Fashion: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- [12]. M'Bokolo, E. (1990). *La Mode en Afrique: Un langage culturel*. Editions Karthala.
- [13]. Fischer, E. (2001). *Women and Fashion: A Sociocultural Analysis*. Berg Publishers.