

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CLAUDE GRUNTIZKY: Hello, everyone. Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, depending on where you are. We have people from all over the world, all different continents.

So it's great to have so much enthusiasm around our TRUE Africa University MIT X Africa webinar series. Last week, we had Professor Jeffrey Sachs, the economist, and he gave a few interesting perspectives about how Africa could really use these next 10 years as the takeoff moment, and what Africa could do as a continent to become an economic powerhouse. So that was really, really interesting.

And the whole series that we've launched is about sustainable development in Africa. So it's not just the economy. It's also cultural industries. It's also agriculture. It's a lot of different things that can help Africa to grow in more sustainable ways.

My name is Claude Gruntizky, and I'm very, very happy to introduce our speaker for this week. She is actually one of the first people that I met when I came to MIT as a student, a bit more than a decade ago. She happens to be from my country, Togo. She's also Togolese American, like me.

And we're going to be talking about how Africa's place in the world is negotiated and articulated. Now a lot of people kind of emailed me when they saw our program on TRUE Africa University website, wondering, what does that actually mean? Well, she's going to be telling you what that means because Professor Amah Edoh is an anthropologist who's interested in the production of knowledge about Africa.

So that means, how do we define Africa as a category of thought that is produced through material practices across African and non African sites? Now it sounds very intellectual, but the topic is going to be related to the work that she's doing for her new book that she's completing. And the book is called *Our Grandmothers' Cloth, Materiality, Class, and Global Membership in the Age of the "New Africa."* So this really goes towards tracing the trajectory of Dutch wax cloth between Holland and Togo.

It's a topic that I feel very, very strongly about because my mom is actually a seamstress, a retired seamstress. But I grew up my entire childhood surrounded by these wax prints that came to define the identity of Africa now around the world. Professor Amah Edoh is a graduate of Harvard University, and she completed her PhD in MIT's program in History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology, and Society in 2016. And she's been teaching at MIT in the Anthropology and African Studies department.

So my name is Claude Gruntizky for those of you who are joining us for the first time. This is actually our fourth webinar. I'm the founder of two media companies, Trace and TRUE Africa, and both of these media companies have been entirely devoted to championing the creativity of African youth.

I got an MBA at MIT as a Sloan Fellow, and the reason I'm launching TRUE Africa University is because I want to help find actionable ways to nurture Africa's talent. Now this series is brought to you by the MIT Center for International Studies. I'm actually also a research affiliate at MIT'S Center for International Studies, which we call CIS for short. And CIS aims to support and promote international research and education at MIT.

The research creatively addresses global issues while helping to educate the next generation of global citizens. The website is cis.mit.edu. Our other partner in launching the series of webinars is the MIT Africa program. The MIT Africa program is actually based in the MIT Center for International Studies, at CIS.

And the program empowers students and faculty to advance knowledge and solve the world's greatest challenges by connecting them with leading researchers, companies, and other partners in African countries. For more information, you can visit the website, which is misti.mit.edu. So finally, before I give the floor and the stage to Amah Edoh, I just wanted to tell you that you can watch this entire webinar on our TRUE Africa University website.

And the reason I created TRUE Africa University I was saying is because I'm really hoping to create an African learning community that is committed to accelerating Africa sustainable development. And the way we do this is by mobilizing a global network of academic, industrial, and institutional partners. So Professor Amah Edoh, thank you so much for joining us. I can't wait to hear about our grandmothers' cloth.

M AMAH EDOH: Hi, Claude. Hi, everyone. Thank you for having me. I'm very happy very excited to be here.

Thank you to everyone behind the scenes, also, Michelle, Ari, Nora. I laughed out loud when you said people emailed you and were like, what does it mean? How is Africa's place, was it? This is my research agenda.

How is Africa's place in the world negotiated and articulated? What does this mean? Really simply, it just means what does it mean to be African and what does it mean to be African in the world? What does it mean to be Black and African in particular is my personal obsession and the subject of some of my research and the question that sort of underlies the work that I've done and that I will be presenting to you all today.

Before I begin, I just want to acknowledge our forebearers, the folks who've made it possible for me to be here, for us to be here, both in blood and intellectually, the people who paved our way, paved the way for me, and who live on through us. So when Claude invited me to be a part of the series, I started thinking about-- first of all, it's a lofty task, right, thinking about Africa and Africans in the next century. But I figured, OK, if there's one thing I could contribute to this conversation, what would it be on? What would my contribution to be about?

And pretty quickly, it came to me that it would have to be about knowledge, about the politics of knowledge, about what knowledge we value, whose knowledge we value, what we recognize as expertise, and why. Because the categories through which we see and make sense of the world, the relationships that we see between these categories, that's the foundation of everything, right. And not to mention that as African people, the erasure or the attempted erasure of our knowledge systems, of our languages, our beliefs have been core to our dehumanization, right, and to our structural marginalization down the line, and to the production of Africa as not just marginal, but as the margin.

So that's kind of what we're starting from. And so for me, any project of imagining African futures has to start with engaging the politics of knowledge. That's really the foundation. And not in the reactive logic, but quite simply, in the logic of truth telling. That's really the basis of it.

So for me, the question of how our place in the world, how we make a place for ourselves in the world, how we see ourselves in the world, is an open question, a question to keep coming back to. But what I hope to do today is to share a little bit about my research with you, which kind of touches on these questions of knowledge, and then to use that to open up to broader themes. So let me share my screen with you. All right.

Oh, and Claude, I have to correct you. You said I'm a graduate of Harvard University. I rep MIT all the way. Harvard was a blip. It was a two year blip,

CLAUDE I like that.

GRUNTIZKY:

M AMAH EDOH: Be careful. All right. So as Claude mentioned, my project is titled, or the book manuscript I'm working on is settled our grandmothers cloth. And it will become clear soon why I titled it that.

But I put these quite these pictures here as a way of both speaking to the object that is at the heart of this research, and as a way of marking my positionality, because I do come to this work as someone who identifies as African as well as Togolese, and I'm also American. And so I'm very much implicated and my personal kind of trajectory is very much implicated in the questions that I bring to the subject and to-- yeah, the way that I read it, the way that I read practices around it. But these picture is also meant to convey the uses to which wax cloth was put in West Africa and Togolese cultures, right, as not only dress, but as a way of marking kinship.

These are photos from my personal archive. This is my family, my mother, grandmother, uncles. And so you see here in the sharing of cloth and wearing the same cloth and marking of kinship. You also see in the picture of a baby me with my grandmother the ways that the cloth is used to mark respectability along the lines of gender, age, class, status.

And I use that just as a way to introduce some of the basics of what wax cloth means in Togolese and West African cultures. So this cloth is known-- I'm referring to it as wax cloth. I think colloquially in English, it's often referred to as African print cloth, in French, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

And as Claude mentioned, for this research what I did is that I followed the cloth, a variety of I produced in the Netherlands in particular, which is the variety that is most prized and most expensive in West Africa. And so I followed that around along its trajectory from design and marketing in the Netherlands to selling buying and tailoring in Lomé in Togo because in addition to Lomé being my home city, it was also essential note in the distribution of Dutch wax cloth throughout much of the 20th century, which was the height of the cloth trade. So the cloth is really ubiquitous on the West African landscape and has come to be a marker of West African cultural identity and pride, as Claude mentioned, for continental and diasporic Africans alike.

And a few years ago, there was kind of what I call a gotcha moment, when Western media realized that this cloth that was increasingly visible on runways, brought forward by African fashion designers, but also non African fashion designers, as emblematic again of this African Pride. And there was this discovery by Western media that, oh, this is actually not indigenous to West Africa, right. And all the more so, the backlash was all the more intense.

Oh, not only is it not indigenous to West Africa, but this object that's been used to perform and mark West Africans or Africans more broadly is actually a product of colonial trade routes, right, linking Europe, South East Asia, and West Africa. And yes, indeed, that is kind of the biography of wax cloth. It's what we know today as wax cloth.

It's essentially, to kind of tell the brief history, a mechanized version of a handmade batik printing technique from the East Indies, what is present day Indonesia, a technique that was mechanized in the 19th century in view of producing these textiles and selling them in to those East Indian markets. But then the imperfections that were produced in the machine version were not desirable for the Indonesian consumers. It turned out to be valued by West African consumers where the Dutch were trading, had been trading for a few centuries.

And the aesthetic of the batik also echo the aesthetic of the aesthetic of West African textile traditions. And the fact that you actually had imperfections in the cloth was valid because it made each part of the cloth unique. And so the cloth that had initially been intended for Indonesian markets turned out to be or was rerouted and started being made specifically for West African markets in the late 19th, early 20th century, and through a series of circulation of knowledge and aesthetics that I'm not going to get into but I'm had talk to a bit more.

So the gotcha moment that I'm referring to held that, oh, wait, this thing that you thought was African is actually not African. But it was based on the premise that what made this object itself, what gave it or gives it its cultural value, is tied to its production, where it's produced, who is making it. These are images from the VLISCO archives of designers a few decades back and then of production also.

Now the thing is, if we accept this premise that this cloth is not West African because it is not made by West Africans or in West Africa, what do we make of the fact that in Lomé, the most iconic and most val-- let's say the most iconic designs, and not just designs but color ways in which the designs are printed-- are often referred to-- here comes my not so good [INAUDIBLE] as [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] which means "our grandmother's cloth." If we sort of reject wholesale the idea that because this cloth is not made in West Africa, it is not African, then that makes a liar of anyone who calls this cloth our grandmothers' cloth.

And so this is partly what my research was came to speak to, right? What do we make of the fact that people are referring to this cloth as our grandmothers' cloth? Is this just a statement of possession? The fact that our grandmothers used to own this cloth or have owned this cloth? And that's the beginning and end of it.

Or is there something else here? And that's where studying has an anthropologist, going and seeing what folks do with and say about this cloth starts to shed light on this question. As I mentioned earlier, my informants were sellers, buyers, tailors of the cloth, and in these interactions, a few themes kind of were my interactions with informants. A few themes are recurrent, or a few figures.

Notably, the figure of the Nana Benz, which some of you might be familiar to. I am willing to bet that every Togolese or most of at least of a certain generation are familiar with the Nana Benz, who were a cadre of wholesalers of this cloth who are central to the distribution of the cloth across West and Central Africa for 30 to 40 years. They amass great fortunes and political power and are widely credited with putting Togo on the map.

So I include this image here because it's from the official Togo tourism website. And they have different categories for what you see in Togo, cultural, nature, and so on. And so the market is one of them because Togo has sort of commerce as an integral part of the economy. And here in the headline, it says, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], the main market in Lomé, is one of the largest in the subregion, and probably best known for its Nana Benz.

The Nana Benz figure in the narrative that is being told of the country both in terms of the commercial power, but then also in terms of their cultural significance ultimately. And there is a song. I asked Ari to put in the chat. And there was even a song by a Togolese singer and kind of world musician King Mensah, where he says that song is in homage to the Nana Benz. And in the lyrics at some point he says, "I went all the way to Japan, and they asked me where I'm from. I said I'm from Togo, and they said, ah, that's the country of the Nana Benz."

This is the way that these women, through the fortunes that they amassed and the political power that they had, put Togo quite literally on the map. And they did this through the way-- this is a picture of some of the Nana Benz in Holland with executives from VLISCO. They had exclusive contracts with distributors of the manufacturers of these textiles and exclusive rights for most of the time-- that ended somewhat recently-- exclusive rights of particular designs, which means that they could then, once they got the fabric, then they decided they sort of, yeah. They ran the field, right.

They had to figure out how to make this fabric valuable, desirable. And they did so through things like creating artificial scarcity, right, to increase demand or also naming practices were an important technique. Actually, before I come back to naming practices, the term Nana Benz, it refers to the fact that these-- Nana is a term of respect for an older woman.

Yeah. It's not quite Madam, it's not quite auntie, not quite grandma, but it's a term of respect for a woman elder. And Benz because they were so wealthy they purchased the first Mercedes Benz in Togo. And this name has stuck.

So this picture is of current events. And I took it while I was doing research in Lomé when Nelson Mandela died. And so the fabric that she's wearing herself is a reissue of an old design that she had rights to or she had ordered.

And she was the only one who was going to be distributing it. And she had a name in mind for it beforehand, but when Nelson Mandela died, she saw an opportunity, and named the design Madiba, Nelson Mandela's clan name. And this is one of the ways that wax cloth, wax prints, are given value, by tying them to current events or punctual events, tying them to Proverbs, to music, to things that are happening in the moment that tie the design to a particular period.

Another design that you see I guess to her left, the red prints with the bird, is another classic that's called in French [SPEAKING FRENCH]. If you step out, I step out. It's a cage with a bird flying out and another one flying out behind it. The message is to communicate to your partner if you step out, I, too, will step out.

And that's another example of naming that sort of built on humor. But that is part of the work of the means by which the cloth has been given value. We'll skip over that one.

So beyond the Nana Benz figure, another important sort of theme that emerged was the whole the regimen of care for the cloth, right, a whole discourse around how you take care of this cloth, that this is cloth and needs to be taken care of particularly in a special way. A recurring trope in conversations like from my home with my mother on to the various tailor shops of the various people I interviewed was-- and I wonder if your mother if you heard your mother say this too, Claude-- but you don't put scissors in [SPEAKING TOGOLESE], which is the Togolese word for Dutch wax cloth. You don't put scissors in [SPEAKING TOGOLESE] any which way, right. You don't just cut it anyhow because it's cloth that you have to take care of, that you have to craft in that particular way.

CLAUDE I witnessed it all the time.

GRUNTIZKY:

M AMAH EDOH: OK. Thank you.

[LAUGHTER]

These are images of an old style technique that is again not indigenous to West Africa, right, that was brought in with machines as, again, part of these colonial trade routes and through missionary education, related, or I guess part of what's known in English as smocking. In Lomé, it's known as [SPEAKING TOGOLESE], or this style of technique which literally translates as old lady necklines. And it's a technique that's used to ornament the neckline of garments in the traditional, the customary three piece suits that women wear where you have a long skirt, a blouse, and then the third piece of fabric that is used to either tie it to the back or you tie it around your hips.

And the reason I put these pictures here is because the logic of making these customary kind of [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], these suits, these are the traditional way you wear [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] is a logic of both preservation and sort of highlighting the value of the cloth. What do I mean by that? The idea is that when you buy the standard six yard length of fabric, you want to keep it because it's something that you will then hand off to your daughter who will then pass it on to her daughter, right.

It's part of kind of how jewelry might be passed on in other cultures and also in West African cultures. And so this is tied to why you don't cut it any which way. You want to have the cloth be close to intact as possible so that your daughter can also have it and perhaps craft it for herself, right.

And so tailors have means of sewing skirts where they saw it without cutting the fabric, where you can fold the fabric into it so that you can keep extending the skirt also as your body changes, expanding or shrinking, or you can undo it altogether and still have the length of fabric.

Or these [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] techniques which, using repetitive and extremely time consuming sort of motions or technique, allow you to shape fabric and make cotton fabric pliable or stretchable without having to cut it or while minimizing how much you cut it, right. And these are all part of the ways that the cloth value has been sustained, and that making this an object valuable by taking care of it in order to then pass it on, right.

And this knowledge is knowledge that is passed on from mother to daughter. It's knowledge that's passed on among women within peer groups. And it's through practices like these that the cloth's high monetary and cultural value has come to be established. OK.

So go back. To me, this question of our grandmothers' cloth, right, remember the question I posed at the beginning was, well, if we say this thing is not West African because it's not made in West Africa, then what do we make of the fact that people refer to it as our grandmothers' cloth? What do they mean by that, right?

What does that mean? Is it just pointing to the fact that our grandmothers own this? Or is there more to it? And what I'm sort of pointing to here very quickly is the fact that our grandmothers' cloth points not just to possession, but to material practices of care and processes, of knowledge transmission, and, indeed, expert knowledge.

Knowledge about how to shape tastes, as I alluded to in the Nana Benzs practice. How to ensure the longevity of textiles, right, how to craft garments, how to shape cotton fabric, how to make it pliable, how to sort of work, transform this fabric while maintaining it also, right. That is expert knowledge. That is expert skill. That is also often devalued because of the people who hold it and the people who perform it, right.

And it's important to understand the ways that these women's work has contributed to the value of this cloth. One, it's core to redrawing the geography of wax cloth. So whereas you have the gotcha moment of, this is not really African because it's not from Africa or because it wasn't made in West Africa.

My informants or sellers of the cloth pointed to the fact that during the trade's heyday, customers would come from Central Africa from throughout West Africa to Lomé to buy the cloth. And I heard this over and over again. People would say the cloth from Lomé is the cloth that shines the brightest, even though the Dutch wax cloth that sold in [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] or in [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] is coming from the same factory, right.

But the work that the Nana Benz and other sellers did to sort of make this cloth valuable effectively redrew the map of it, and made Lomé the center of the cloth's value, even as they leveraged the fact that it came from Holland. So they found a way to make the cloth's dual heritage a source of profit. And just the mere fact that wax cloth, not just Dutch wax cloth, but wax cloth but as a whole has come to hold this cultural value and to be this marker of Africanness, even though it's not made in West Africa, that alone points to the work that has happened downstream from production to give this object value.

Now, I want to be clear that these questions, my whole argument here about the work and recognizing the contributions of these women as labor and as expert knowledge, that that doesn't preclude or kind of nullify the need for the very important conversations about Africans owning the means of production of the goods that they consume, right. That question absolutely still stands. And that's a question that my economist colleagues are far better suited than I to address.

What does it take to do that? What is it-- yeah. What does it take to do that? And companies like Akosombo Textiles in Ghana, which is Ghana based, Ghana owned, employing Ghanaians, designing designs, creating designs, and also working with a massive archive of Ghanaian designs, they're doing this and printing wax print textiles with these designs.

We have models for what it means to own the production of textiles and much to be learned from the work that's being done by folks like Akosombo. But this is the thing. Even once we own the companies, right, who do we value? What knowledge do we respect? What bodies do we make visible in the advertising of our products, right?

There was one example that I have come back to often, which was a video, an advertisement, that VLISCO used that was meant to point to the fact that the value or the love that West African consumers, West African women in particular, gave for Dutch wax cloth is passed on from generation to generation. And it was a really beautiful video with black and white pictures of a woman, seeing her mother, her grandmother, and then she had a baby girl. And they're all wearing the same fabric.

And so we see the fact that this attachment to the cloth sets across generations. Then there's a suitcase where the cloth is being kept, which is again another trope or a part of the practice of keeping and treasuring this cloth, the idea that you have to keep it out of sight. And so women usually keep it outside keep it in a suitcase under the bed or in a closet.

So all of those elements were captured in the ad, but then the ad will end. The woman, the main model featured in the ad was this beautiful, young, thin woman who doesn't necessarily exemplify the sort of like-- oh, and it was a kind of fancy hotel room. The video is no longer available or else I would have shown it. I should of download it while it was up.

But it doesn't quite exemplify the spaces and the bodies through which this cloth has been given value. Even as it kind of extracts the labor through which that value has been given, right, and so the work of women in passing on the attachment to this commodity over generations is made visible in the video, but not the bodies of the actual women who do this. And these are ethical questions.

It's not just about owning the means of production, but once you own the factory, who do you make visible? Who do you put up front as the picture of the commodities that you're selling or as a desirable consumer? These, to me, are the questions.

And so I posited this as a question about knowledge and expertise because all too often behind this distinction between expert and not experts are racialized gendered class hierarchies and marginalization processes. And ultimately, behind this distinction between expert and an expert is a value system about who is important, about who matters, and who counts. And so for me in the case of Dutch wax, it's really important to restore the work and the contribution of West African women, not only the Nana Benz, but really across the entire economic spectrum in what has made this object what it is today.

But while making visible this labor is already an intervention, I want us to go beyond that to recognize these forms of practice as expert knowledge. What does it mean to think a seamstress as an expert? What does it mean to think our grandmothers as experts?

I really love [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. In Togo, they're kind of a small seamstress, so the neighborhood seamstress, right. What does it mean to think of it as an expert? I love this picture because it was one of my informants, and she was demonstrating the technique for me while taking care of her toddler-- her kid was like a year and a half-- and doing this very vigorous work of pulling threads in the fabric in order to reshape it, right.

This is difficult work. This is a form of expertise that is all too often dismissed because of the people who perform this kind of work. And so to me as I mentioned, these are ethical questions about who counts, who matters, and who is seen. And ultimately, what kind of world do we want to fashion for ourselves?

So I want to use this. What does it mean to think about this space as a place, this tiny kind of shack, right? That's an actually a workshop for a tailor. What does it mean to think of this as a place where you can have experts and expert practice unfolding?

So what I'm proposing here is, as I see it, part of a broader kind of conversation about decolonizing knowledge, which takes particular importance for us as Africans, as Black Africans because as I mentioned earlier of the way that knowledge has been or the politics of knowledge have been core to our dehumanization. Now, the subject of decolonizing knowledge was brought to the fore perhaps most dramatically by the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa in 2015. A student first through excrements at a statue of Cecil Rhodes, imperialist [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], and then staged protests for the removal of his statue from the campus.

But Rhodes Must Fall and calls for the decolonization of education, it was about more than just the removal of symbols. It was about transforming curricula. It was about transforming hiring practices, citational practices, and about bringing back including voices that have been systematically excluded.

And for more on that, I would refer you to this video lecture by Professor Akosua Adomako Ampofo from the University of Ghana, and who's president of the African Studies Association of Africa, where she reflects on what it means to decolonize academia. And she provides both kind of an intellectual history of sorts, of movements of decolonize education, and of the ongoing import of this project in our lives. Now there's a lot of exciting work, I think, happening on this front and that has been happening, but perhaps is getting a bit more sort of traction right now.

And I'm just pointing to a couple of examples close to home, in this case, home in Togo and at MIT. When I was in Lomé in 2018, there was this wonderful conference organized by [INAUDIBLE] who is a sculptor, a painter, and Professor of Architecture in Lomé and also a Vodou priest, that was around when *Black Panther* came out. That was about articulating, sort of imagining, exactly, that's it's like African futures, but anchoring them in West African epistemology.

So thinking health care, thinking urban design, thinking food, right. Starting from local and indigenous knowledges. Tied to that is work that my colleague here at MIT, Chakanetsa Mavhunga, is doing on Global South cosmologies and epistemology that is bringing together from Africa, from South America, from Asia, the Pacific and different indigenous groups, and trying to foster a conversation that centers these Global South epistemologies, and really which I think is just so important.

And then you have work by folks like-- I'm sorry. I meant to put their names on here. I completely forgot. But on the left, you have Professor Sylvia Tamale from Makerere University in Kampala in Uganda. And then [INAUDIBLE] who is a journalist and activist.

And they're both working with feminism and engaging this concept from a dominant epistemology in articulating a project for decolonization. So it's a different tack from the project of sort of centering African epistemology and African and indigenous epistemology or knowledge systems to offer a different way of seeing the world, of interpreting the world, of acting on the world. In this case, working with concepts from the dominant epistemology, but using them also in the same kind of logic of decolonization.

And to me, all of this work is necessary, right. We need to be working on both fronts, on all fronts. We need to be making visible and expanding our sense of what counts as knowledge or expertise. We need to be learning, studying, employing, African epistemologies. We need to be using dominant epistemologies where they're useful and also casting light on their limits and fallacies where they stop being useful.

And I think if I'm to kind of gesture to that earlier big question, I think this is how we redefine our place in the world for the next century. And I'll end on this picture because it's an image that I think represents what I think we should not do. This is like the worst thing, right. You're not supposed to show images of examples of what not to do. You're supposed to show images of what to do.

But this picture, I think, is sort of really powerful. It's an image I took during my fieldwork in the Netherlands, and it was during a photo shoot for the collection of designs that I was following for my research. And so you have a model, a black African woman model, and it's I think it's just really beautifully done.

She's wearing a trench coat cut from a particular design, and then the design is replicated in the back drop so that she disappears into the design. And you just see this continuity of the design and you almost forget that she's there. And to me, I think this represents exactly what I'm talking about, right, both the work that Black African women have put into making this object, this commodity valuable, and the simultaneous invisibilization of their presence and of their labor.

And so for me as we think about how do we do better? What we want for this next century? It's about making visible the bodies the bodies that are at the heart of producing value for us, for our companies, for our commodities, to actually make those people visible, even as we derive value from their work.

OK. I will stop there, and thank you for listening. And Claude, I am looking forward to chatting.

**CLAUDE
GRUNTIZKY:**

Well, here I am. Because I'm looking forward to chatting, too. I did get feedback that these are so many interesting questions that we should get to more of the Q&A, but I did want to kind of interject with a personal anecdote. When I saw that picture of these Nana Benz in the Netherlands with the VLISCO directors, I realized that I knew of a lot of these women.

I knew them as a child growing up. [INAUDIBLE] was a very close friend of my late father's, and I saw how they were able to build these distribution centers. And a lot of them, they weren't necessarily very literate. Some of them couldn't really even read, but they sure knew how to count.

But then what I saw, though, is that in the '90s, they lost a lot of their power, their financial power, because of the devaluation of our West African or francophone West African currency, the CFA. And then what I also saw is when you mentioned their daughters, the knowledge that is passed on from mother to daughter, I also noticed that these daughters that I knew growing up, many of them went to study in Paris or London like I did. And when they came back, they weren't able to run their mothers companies.

They might have been very educated in the Western way, but they weren't as astute as their mothers were. And some of these companies just collapsed. So that rise and fall. Can you speak to that a little bit?

M AMAH EDOH: No, thank you for bringing that up. I think that's a really important point, right. And it's a great illustration of what I'm trying to speak to, the idea that you have-- as you mentioned, a lot of some of the Nana Benz did not complete very advanced formal education, but learned, in French you say [SPEAKING FRENCH], they learned by doing, in the midst, like through doing.

And so were incredibly skilled businesswomen, right, even though they didn't have formal education. And the assumption is that, oh, well, now that they have money, they can stand there. They can build a lot of houses which was sort of what the Togolese could do with capital.

But then also send their children abroad for education and to go learn how to do business. But then the fact that the daughters did not quite have the same business savvy as their mothers because they didn't learn on the ground shows precisely that there's a knowledge specific to the Dutch wax trade that comes from doing it, right, and that it's not just you go to a fancy university in France and you learn how to do it better. Absolutely not.

So I think that's a really important point to raise, and I think also even though the Nana Benz are glorified, basically, I think in that kind of Togolese lore, but I think it's important to recognize that they also passed their business on from mother to daughter, right. And it was a closed circle. It was very hard to integrate the Nana Benz if you were not part of that original core, right.

So there was a concentration of capitalist, economic, and political power. So a small group of people. So I'm not talking about-- what am I trying to say here? So I mean it's a complex story in terms of-- I guess the intervention I want to make in making visible the knowledge of different sort of people who are usually excluded, the Nana Benz were economically and politically powerful, but dismissed, I think, or maybe not brought to the fore in the general narrative about this class because they're West African women, because they're older women, because they're Black, all these things, that they don't look like business women.

They don't look like experts, however we understand that to mean, right. But then we have to understand that even within the Togolese context is a very clear hierarchy and very clear also processes of marginalization where the Nana Benz marginalized others. So we have to see these intersecting frames through which people are made invisible, basically.

CLAUDE GRUNTIZKY: Well, there are so many interesting questions. I'm going to start with Raymond Lawson, and he says that he feels that the Togolese Nana Benz and the Africans in general have reappropriated the cloth as a rebellion against colonial authority. And that's his take on the supremacy of our Togolese Nana Benz, our grandmothers and mothers, as he says.

So can you speak a little bit about that spirit of rebellion that might have been kind of really interesting, right? Because they were distributing these European fabrics in Africa, but then at the same time, Raymond feels that they might have been rebelling against colonial authority.

M AMAH EDOH: There's something to it. I don't know if I would think about it as rebellion, but I think there's a sense of-- the story feeds itself because the wax cloth is seen as traditional clothing, right, and part of African dress. And so I think in donning it, and donning it in a way that also signaled modernity and respectability, that signaled having money, signaled wealth, without ascribing to the Schemas of Western dress, right, which these women also have, also wore, right.

But there's a way they compare this cloth to assert both your cultural identity and your presence, who you are in the world, the fact that you're somebody in the world without having to do it the way that the Europeans or the whites of the Western people do it, right. So I think that's certainly part of it, right. And that's why when companies have the white people wear those wax cloth as national garb, right, that's part of it.

But then to what extent is it rebellion if you are you're ultimately wearing something that's being produced by Europeans, right? I think all of it is true. There's both the cultural valence, the cultural performance, that wearing the cloth represented, and the fact that selling and wearing was also implicated in these longstanding colonial and neocolonial dynamics. Both are true.

CLAUDE GRUNTIZKY:

Right. There's a little bit of background noise. But conversely, [INAUDIBLE] she says something that is a little bit different from what Raymond Lawson said because it is true that the cloth is being used as a marker of kinship to symbolize belonging, to the point that you just made. And she remembers that this was the case even in political campaigns.

She says, "As a child, I remember wax cloth with the face of former Togolese President Gnassingbé Eyadéma on it." Yeah. So what about that kinship and that belonging to different political parties?

M AMAH EDOH:

Yeah. It's all part of the same, right. And to be clear, the functions, the way that wax cloth has been used were not limited, did not come about with wax cloth. This is how textiles-- sort of what textiles meant and did in West African cultures that was then applied to this new textile that came in the early 20th century.

And now, sharing cloth as a mark of kinship if you're talking at the family level, then so when you go to a wedding or funeral, right, members of the family will wear the same cloth. Or for a special holiday, you buy cloth and everyone makes the same garment from the same cloth. The uses of it to mark political affiliation are just an extension of the same, right. It's to say we are part of the same body.

And so you can have a standard cloth or you can have cloth that's printed, these commemorative cloths that are like ones that I showed. The seller had one for Nelson Mandela that had his portrait in it. So then yeah, going back to the question of rebellion, right. You have to look more closely about the cloth that's being worn, about sort of the chain.

Where is it coming from? Who's making it? Who's selling it? And everything to interpret what's happening through it's wearing because you could be wearing a cloth that's made-- let's see. What would be a good example?

But that's made in Togo, but then has a portrait of-- I don't know-- [INAUDIBLE] on it or something, right. And is it rebellious? It's not inherently rebellion, right. You have to look at the kind of cloth, the kind of design, really, that's printed on the cloth as well as how and where it's been made in order to interpret what's happening through it.

CLAUDE GRUNTIZKY:

Right--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

The former president of France who was also very, very tied to Togo and is a big lover of Togo. Stacey Kennedy has an interesting question about the social messages that were conveyed in the cloth. She is fascinated to know who designed the cloth? Who created the messages that the cloth conveyed? If this was done in Holland, how are they connecting with West African concerns? Or were they just dictating West African concerns?

M AMAH EDOH: No, good question for the design. So design practice, at least the company that I studied, the Dutch one, changed over the years. But for most of its history, you had a design studio or team in the Netherlands who were Dutch, mostly Dutch, or for most of the history, Dutch, then now maybe other Europeans and folks from other places, who earlier on were not formally trained in design, but learned by copying these Indonesian batiks for years, getting that aesthetic in their bodies, really, before then proposing their own designs.

But then, design sketches were be shared with representatives of the trading houses that would sell these cloths in West Africa, and then get feedback from people like these West Africans then sellers who knew consumer tastes that then would inform the designs that were made and the changes that were made about what people liked. And then over the years, you also had some of the Nanas sending designs that would then be turned into something that could actually be produced. But this is the thing.

What happens to the designs once it goes to market the naming and all of that, that happens downstream. So once the manufacturers realize that naming was part of the ways that designs are given value, there were instances where they tried naming designs ahead of time. But it didn't work, right, because the naming requires a certain cultural competency and a deep understanding of what people will get, what people will like, and what people will see.

The cultural competency that you don't know is that you don't have if you don't know the context deeply. So it was sort of this process that's been-- the design's the aesthetic is something I argue also-- but the aesthetic of what makes wax cloth itself is profoundly shaped by the practice of sellers. In a way, that for me challenges us to think design practice beyond the design studio and extending all the way to the market stall because that's really where the sort of knowledge and expertise about these taste was refined and fed back into the aesthetic.

CLAUDE GRUNTIZKY: One of our obsessions with everything we're doing with TRUE Africa University is a whole kind of made in Africa movement and the imperative of actually manufacturing things in Africa and not just importing everything. And there's obviously this whole kind of train of thought that China is building an entire second continent in Africa, right. And last week, Jeffrey Sachs talked about the Chinese model and that could be replicated in different ways in Africa.

But then [INAUDIBLE] asked a really interesting question. If we look at where the wax industry is now, that those fabrics who is manufacturing them now, and the question is, have there have been Chinese knockoffs of these types of cloth patterns? And I think it's a very interesting question, and I think you should perhaps explain what's in the markets now.

M AMAH EDOH: Oh yeah, absolutely. Thank you. I mean, I didn't give an exhaustive sort of like a picture of it in the interest of time, but absolutely.

The Chinese produce textiles are the majority of the wax brands that you have on the West African or Togolese markets. But there's a range of them. So I think there's a kind of shorthand way of dismissing and saying, oh, Chinese made stuff are just copies and they're just knockoffs and they are low value.

But in fact, there's a wide range. We have Chinese made actual wax print designs. And then you have different kinds of copies. You have imitations. There's a whole spectrum of varying qualities also.

But universally, they are cheap or significantly cheaper than the Dutch produced textiles and which is part of also what restructured the whole market of the Dutch wax and the wax cloth trade in West Africa. Yeah. And also kind of prompted the rebranding efforts by the Dutch company to rebrand itself as a global company since it no longer had the kind of sort of exclusivity in West and West African markets that it had had for decades, right.

And so there are lots of downstream effects from the entry and the presence of Chinese manufacturers on the market. And I can, if folks are interested, provide links for articles on exactly this by anthropologist Nina Sylvanus, who's written about this.

CLAUDE Right. Well, as we said, we're going to share the presentation and any links on our trueafricauniversity.com
GRUNTIZKY: website. Actually, [INAUDIBLE] asked the question which I found to be kind of funny and interesting.

He says, "do you think our modern African"-- no, sorry. See, that was a Freudian slip. "Do you think our modern American cotton industry should be paying reparations because I think that would be a great source of subsidies." I think it's funny, right?

M AMAH EDOH: Should the American cotton industry--

CLAUDE Should be paying reparations.
GRUNTIZKY:

M AMAH EDOH: Paying reparations.

CLAUDE Yeah.
GRUNTIZKY:

M AMAH EDOH: I'm lost.

CLAUDE Yeah. Well, I guess that the reparations for the Africans, right, and then the African-Americans because a lot of
GRUNTIZKY: the--

M AMAH EDOH: I see. The American. OK. I was imagining like an African-American [INAUDIBLE] Yeah. Well, I can't even begin--

CLAUDE That's a big debate.
GRUNTIZKY:

M AMAH EDOH: --to touch that question.

CLAUDE We can't even begin to go there right now. I'd like to-- because we're almost out of time-- I do want to end as we
GRUNTIZKY: normally always end with the question about three books you would recommend to our participants who kind of ask all these interesting questions and kind of weighed in. So three books? Any books that you would recommend right now?

M AMAH EDOH: Yeah. So I've thought about this, and I'm going to cheat a little bit. And it's not related to my-- well, it is, a little bit.

The first one, I think, is by Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *L'Aventure ambiguë*, which is one of the classics of francophone African literature, which to me is just a really beautiful, really profound reflection of what it means to be us. And us in a way that's anchored at the time of kind of the colonial encounter in Senegal, but then more broadly than that. And I think it has this really beautiful line that is one of my favorite lines ever, which is [SPEAKING FRENCH] which is, "Is what they will learn worth what they will forget?" which to me is really at the crux of Africans being in the world.

Another one of my other favorite books is *Lose your Mother* by Saidiya Hartman, who's an African-American historian and wrote this book I think in '98, and it was her going to West Africa. And she writes just gorgeously about what it means to be someone from the diaspora encountering the space. And again, what's visible, what's not visible, how her body is received in this space. And what I find really beautiful there is how she employs literary techniques to fill in the gaps of the voices from enslaved people that can be recovered. And she uses what she calls critical fabulation to imagine what could have been, but in a way that's anchored in the archives. And it's really gorgeous and some really beautiful writing.

CLAUDE Yeah. Go ahead. Go ahead. Go ahead. I know you could keep going.

GRUNTIZKY:

M AMAH EDOH: And then I'm thinking the third one is not a book. This is how I'm cheating. Because for those of us who can't read books right now because a pandemic, a short story that was really, I think, the most delightful, most beautiful thing I've read recently by Khaddafina Mbabazi from Uganda. And it's published in the *JoBurg Review*. You can find it online.

And it's called "Loyalty." It's really beautiful. It talks about-- I don't want to give it away because it's kind of the magic of it, but I think girlhood and girl friendships or relationships in a way that's anchored in middle class African experience without any complexes and just really just really gorgeous.

CLAUDE Thank you so much, Amah. This was great. I mean, how we see our place in the world as Africans is such a central debate topic for everything to do with TRUE Africa University. Again, we'll put the references in the presentation that will be shared on the website.

GRUNTIZKY:

I did want to talk about next week's webinar, which will be with Kofi Bio. Kofi Bio is an architect. He works with Adjaye Associates in Accra, and he leads the Africa practice there. And he's going to tell us about how he believes architecture in general can change people's lives, but with a specific focus on the African metropolis and urban planning in Africa, and how that could change in the next few years.

So I also want again to thank our partners and sponsors, the MIT Center for International Studies, which aims to support and promote international research and education at MIT. And again, the MIT-Africa program. For those who will come in at the beginning, the MIT-Africa program is based at the Center for International Studies, and the goal is to empower MIT students and faculty, such as our wonderful professor Amah Edoh, to advance knowledge and solve the world's greatest challenges by connecting them with leading researchers, companies, and other partners in African countries.

So with that, I'm Claude Gruntizky. I'm the founder of TRUE Africa University, and we're aiming to become an African learning community that is committed to accelerating Africa sustainable development by mobilizing a global network of academic, industrial, and institutional partners. So see you next Thursday, noon Eastern time, with Kofi Bio. We're going to talk about architecture.

And again, thank you very much professor Amah Edoh for this illuminating talk. That was one of the words that came into the chat just now, for this illuminating talk about Africa. Thank you.

M AMAH EDOH: Thank you, Claude. Thanks for having me.

CLAUDE Bye.

GRUNTIZKY:

[MUSIC PLAYING]