

BOUBOUS

A fashion symbol of pride and comfort

The sphere of North American fashion tends to overlook the diversity of clothing pieces from African culture, with a glaring emphasis on European-centered designs during the past few decades.

Because of that, many people miss out on the history, extensive creativity and cross-continental staples of Afrocentric fashion.

But for me, a 21-year-old Nigerian-American woman, it sparked a realization of how central boubous have become in the African continent, spanning borders, traditions and hundreds of languages.

Boubous are loose-fitting garments usually made from wax prints like ankara, a cotton-based fabric, but depending on the style one wants, they can also be designed from silk or chiffon.

They are worn in various regions of Africa and their name is the French translation of

“mbubb,” which is the name for boubous in Wolof, a West African language mainly spoken in Senegal, Gambia and Mauritania.

Boubous have a long history spanning as far back as the eighth century. Fashion historians believe the origin can be traced back to Berber or Tuareg cultures in Northern Africa, and spread to

African cultures, but with the turn of decades and fashion adapting to the passing time, boubous have become more versatile, now suitable for both formal and casual settings.

There has also been a shift in gender norms — the attire was once only worn by men, but women began to take part in the 20th

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other African regions due to Islam. Others believe Senegal is the country of origin.

These garments have long stood as a marker for prestige or high-class status in

century.

Boubous are typically custom-made by tailors. The garments incorporate wide, open sleeves with a loose cut for the lower body, and



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men sometimes wear them over trousers.

For women, they may be tailored with rounded necklines and accompanied with traditional jewelry, depending on the occasion.

The design procedure is as follows: “folding the fabric in half, fashioning a neck opening, and sewing the sides halfway up to make flowing sleeves,” according to Fashion History.

Boubous are especially common in West African countries like Nigeria and Senegal, and fall under varying names depending on the culture and language. In the Yoruba tribe, their versions are known as “agbadas” which are mostly worn during ceremonies.

Specific cultural boubous have their own customizations — Northern Ghana’s boubous, called “batakaris,” use thicker cotton blends with shorter hems. Meanwhile, Senegalese and Malian cultures incorporate shimmery, metallic embroidery called “riché,” which come with matching headscarves for women.

Now, boubous have evolved to be worn casually, with modern designers enhancing the traditional features to make them more comfortable for relaxing at home or for everyday use, transcending the ceremonial purposes of the older

generations.

Current Trends

Boubous have always been celebrated by older African generations, but I found that the younger generations in the diaspora are beginning to embrace the garments as well.

There has not been a week in which I did not see someone my age on TikTok or Instagram wearing a gorgeous, unique boubou. Being a member of Gen Z, my eyes were so drawn that I made Pinterest boards inspired by my favorite boubou designs.

One of which was made by Khadija Ba, a Senegalese fashion designer and founder of the fashion brand L'artisanne, credited for modernizing boubous with her eccentric twists on their fabrics and style.

Ba once designed a spectacular metallic gold and pink trimmed boubou, famously worn by Nigerian actress and blogger Temiloluwa Ajibade, to a Basketball Africa League game in 2024.

Boubous that take up space are the best kind, and I adore ones worn by Muslim women to Eid Mubarak celebrations. Tailored with wide open sleeves and soft, bright colors. Even similar garments like kaftans and abayas are always a captivating part of these

gatherings.

In the past year, a party trend dubbed “Dior parties” circulated in West Africa, specifically in Guinea. These stood out from normal parties because the dress code was strictly boubous, providing a safe space for women to be themselves.

This attire brings so much to the conversation of African culture, which deserves more attention in the high fashion realm. With its rich history and diverse artistry, boubous and similar Afro-centered clothing, never leave anything to be desired.

In the words of historian Huda Mustafa, boubous are the “dynamic dialogue between tradition, modernity, hybridity, and authenticity.” It is the traditional attire donned by our elders, with few restrictions. And yet, we still find a way to make it our own.

Written By Temiloluwa Alagbe

