

Mehita Iqani and Simidele Dosekun (eds.), African Luxury: The Politics and Aesthetics of Luxury in Africa, Intellect, 2019

Enrica Picarelli*

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Why and how has luxury come to be considered a borrowed notion in Africa? What does exclusivity mean in contexts where the performance of economic empowerment is regarded as a betrayal of communal advancement? And in what ways does the focus on African luxury contribute to the emerging discipline of critical luxury studies (Armitage 2016)? These are some of the questions addressed in *African Luxury: The Politics and Aesthetics of Luxury in Africa*, the anthology edited by Mehita Iqani and Simidele Dosekun that is the first overview of this theme from a pan-African vantage.

African Luxury addresses the dearth of scholarly work on luxury and the African continent, proposing that it evidences a bias in the perception of the continent that has roots in colonial epistemologies and in the structure of neoliberal capitalism. The volume examines how corporate, political, and individual actors have signified luxury in the last twenty years and how opulence forges (or fails to forge) sociality throughout the continent. The three sections analyze representations of African luxury in the media (“Africa Risen”), the labour of value and associated discourses of taste and cultural capital (“(Re)Crafting African Styles”), and the spatial politics of luxury (“Ambiguous Luxury Space”). The authors present case studies from Nigeria, South Africa, the DRC, Angola, Zimbabwe, and Togo that draw from multiple disciplinary perspectives (social semiotics, visual studies, media studies, and anthropology). These contributions share the aim of countering assumptions that luxury is antithetical to African living and that African opulence is imitative and kitsch. This vision of a passive continent imbibing foreign notions of the good life is shown to be widespread in the mainstream, denoting the Eurocentric bias of most of the extant literature. It constructs the continent as a *recipient* of, not only the material benefits of market-led modernization, but of its ideology as well. Indeed, self-indulgent wastefulness and the pleasures of leisure and travel, which Patrizia Calefato names as indicators of luxury in her book on this subject (2014), indicate an extravagant prosperity that hardly fits the stereotype of Africa as a site of scarcity and need.

* Università di Bologna (Italy); ✉ enrica.picarelli@unibo.it

Precisely what this assumption implies for critical luxury studies is the acknowledgement that luxury is not an innocent, or neutral notion. As the editors explain in the introduction, it is rather a critical site to examine the geopolitical issues informing systems of meaning and behaviours that mould assertions of identity around the discomfiting equation of wealth with status and even human value. In the case of Africa, luxury is loaded with the signs and mythologies that have, for centuries, defined the continent as “an object apart from the world” (Mbembe and Nuttal 2014). Central to this epistemological construction is the erasure of the many histories of African wealth and the persistent infantilization of the continent as constitutively alien and underdeveloped.

This is to say that luxury is a platform to map social, cultural, and political production in Africa — at a time when some actors on the continent are exploiting the discourse of a “rising” continent that shows them as staking significant claims on neoliberal capitalist expansion. As Iqani shows in *Consumption, Media and the Global South* (2016), a possible companion read to *African Luxury* with a wider geographical focus, luxury can help to unpack the workings of neoliberalism on self-making within geopolitical contexts of stark inequality. As areas of the African continent emerge from a decade of economic growth that created new pockets of wealth (owned by a very tiny percentage of the population, to be sure) and new global networks of power are forged, luxury captures transformations in the ways that ultra-rich Africans perceive themselves *vis-à-vis* the world and their counterparts position themselves with respect to it. In this contingency, luxury involves contested assertions of empowerment and the unequal distribution of power at multiple levels, as well exemplified, in particular, in the chapters by Edoh on the Vlisco textile brand, Alweendo and Dosekun on South Africa, and Gastrow on Angola. These perceptions are mediated discursively by a variety of actors that represent luxury as exotic, producing a frontier imagination that constructs African practices of wasteful consumption as modern and cosmopolitan and their beneficiaries as self-made trailblazers of insulated lives predicated on a disturbing materialism, as discussed by Iquani and Mokoena.

However, different chapters show that the promise of unbounded freedom and the assertion of hyper-individualized agency attached to this imagination are also deeply contested. Further, as discussed in the chapter on Zimbabwean artisans weaving beaded necklaces for the South African market, the culture of luxury can also inspire assertions of an African identity that make room for reciprocity, trust and relatedness and are conducive of positive practices of community-making involving marginalized subjects. Focusing on the codes that construct luxury as desirable, as they appear in commercial reports and promotional campaigns, on mainstream and social media, and across the urban geographies of different nations, *African Luxury* convincingly demonstrates that luxury is a site of power and struggle, an elusive concept that distributes and mediates agency across a continent that still struggles to free itself from the stereotype that constructs it as precisely lacking the capacity to act independently. It frames contested claims to cosmopolitanism, global citizenship, modernity, and individualism arising from contingencies steeped in the contradictions of the post-colonial condition and deeply connected to the workings of the global fashion system.

Bibliography

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