CHAPTER IV

CLOTHES FOR A NEW NATION

INDEPENDENCE AND POST-INDEPENDENCE, 1957–1970s

In 1957, Queen Elizabeth's relinquishing of British power to Ghana's Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah was marked by dramatic celebrations on the world stage. By 1960, dubbed The Year of Africa, seventeen nations—mostly West African, including Mali, Benin, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo, which are featured here—followed suit, swiftly altering the political landscape. By the time of Independence, fashion systems in Africa were changing as radically as political systems, and textiles, given their significance as an economic bloc—representing one quarter to just under half of foreign imports for most African-Atlantic nations—were caught up in any discussion of a way forward. (As part of Ghana's Independence campaign, Nkrumah doubled the import tax on printed textiles and removed the tariffs on others in order to spur local fabric production and gain a leg up on companies like Vlisco.)

At the level of everyday lives, dress and the camera were as powerful decolonizing agents as anything in the 1950s–1970s. African women, appearing in various "uniforms" of statehood as they marched and paraded and performed Independence strivings, were redrawing the economy of power and identity in the social and political imagination. Younger women and girls adopted heady expressions of a counterculture. The new fashions were the dramatic proof of a conscious engagement with pan-African and other radical politics across the continent and the globe, even when they appeared more aligned with spaghetti westerns and Jimi Hendrix. Independence had opened a crossroads for identity, a loosening of strictures for many women, and an explosive optimism.

Behind the scenes, other newly independent nations were also acknowledging the huge revenues in textile production and sales. In the 1960s

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women in West Africa spent 12 to 19 percent of their annual income on cloth. Food and cloth were their largest expenditures. Respectability and status were dependent on the display of a New African Woman in dress—part of the Independence and postcolonial project.

AUNTY KORAMAA

One memorable heroine, Aunty Koramaa, reappears in several frames during Independence and post-Independence. An Akuapim woman from the hills beyond Accra, she grew up partly in Jamestown, one of Accra's oldest settlements, flanked by the Guinea Sea and a buttress of old colonial fortresses. She is pictured here in 1956, on the eve of the Gold Coast's Independence, through the 1966 coup that deposed Nkrumah and introduced military rule; and then into the mid-1970s, as Ghana and other nations entered what are known as The Lost Years of serial coups and continual military tumult. In the first photograph, her hemline is nearing the miniskirt, which will become the rage just years later in England and revolutionize fashion worldwide. But still, the respectability of Independence-era modesty in service of nation-building prevails. Her image reflects a radically changing self-identity and the evolution of a nation's consciousness as it entered an age of liberation politics—even if for many it was just at the surface of fashion—decidedly influenced by American Black Power.

Aunty Koramaa III, 1956
Dan. Minolta, Accra · Ghana

Aunty Koramaa IV, 1960s
Unknown · Ghana

Aunty Koramaa and Aggie, c. 1960s
Unknown · Accra, Ghana

Aunty Koramaa II, c. 1975
Diamond Photo Studio No. 4, Accra · Ghana

Aunty Koramaa, c. 1975
Diamond Photo Studio No. 4, Accra · Ghana

Aunty Koramaa I, c. 1970s
Unknown · Ghana

POST-INDEPENDENCE AUNTIES

THE *BOUBOU*, an essential, foundational dress, is encoded with the history of Islamic jihad in Sahelian Africa, the Christian missionary, and African anti-colonial revolution. Both religious movements, along with the sewing machine to zip up the sides, have kept it—a once-unsewn blousy cover that both reveals and conceals—in line with laws of modesty. This sitter wears a sheer *boubou* of Austrian lace, with suggestive peeks at the brassiere. Traditionally the *boubou* could be opaque or sheer or made of eyeleted or open-weave textiles, and part of its sensual appeal and mystery was the way the wide neckline and the open sides from armpit to mid-waist revealed glimpses of the *pagne* and beads or breast. Along with the bell-bottom pants and platform sandals, her *boubou* tells a story of pleasure, seduction, and a happy containment of both tradition and 1950s-to-'70s-era modernity as African women followed their penchant for religious faith, tradition, social freedom, and up-to-the-minute fashion. Her shoes and pants are Latin- and U.S.-influenced via communist alliances with newly decolonized nations. Black Power, U.S. civil rights, and an expanding worldview of pan-Africanist thought began to signal a new kind of social independence, a new sexuality, and a cosmopolitanism that was distinctly homegrown, reaching out to the world.

Aunty DeiDei, 1970s
Unknown · Ghana