

Fashion:

Africa competes with the best

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African winners are generally confined to the worlds of sport and music. But the continent harbours a wealth of talent and potential in other disciplines. Fashion is one of them. Over the years it has become a truly international business.

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The fashion sector in Africa is supported by a flourishing textile industry and creative designers, the majority of whom are college graduates. Contemporary African fashion has shown that it can compete with the big boys through international shows held on the continent. These include Simod (International Fashion Week), organised in Senegal by designer and costumer Oumou Sy; Fima (International Festival of African Fashion), launched on the initiative of Nigerian designer Alphadi; and Africa Designs, organised by South African television channel M-Net.

African designers, drawing inspiration from their rich cultural heritage, are adapting – each in their own style – ancestral techniques to modern cuts and methods. They produce bubus, dresses, trousers and suits cut from authentic fabrics: rabal from Senegal, kita from Côte d'Ivoire, kente from Ghana and aso-oke from Nigeria, to name but a few. The dyeing business (indigo, dyed bazin, etc), for many years the preserve of the Guineas, has become firmly established in Mali and Burkina Faso.

As African fashion begins to emerge and make its mark, symbols that adorned traditional fabrics are being rediscovered: ndop from Cameroon, n'tschack in raffia made by the Kuba in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the korhogo motifs from Côte d'Ivoire and the appliqués on drapes from Abomey (Benin). In addition there is a rich and varied craft sector at the service of the fashion designers, including tanners, jewellers and embroiderers.

The African textile industry in figures

- In 1990, the textile market in Central and West Africa, including Nigeria, was estimated to be worth CFAF 100 billion (about €152.5 million). 60 per cent of this came from fabric manufacturing, four per cent prêt-à-porter, three per cent hosiery, 10 per cent clothing, seven per cent household items, six per cent second-hand clothing and 10 per cent retailers and various others. With the growth in population and increases in the price of goods, the current figures will be much higher (Source: Sofreco and Seres Study [1994] for the French Ministry of Cooperation).
- According to recent estimates, fabric consumption doubled between 1990 and 1996 in Benin alone, when it stood at around CFAF 10 billion (around €15.25 million) per year. It is worth noting that although second-hand clothing accounts for little in terms of turnover, the actual number of units it represents is high, particularly in the CFA zone.
- According to the same source, the textile industry (tailors, retailers, craftsmen, etc.) accounts for 10 million jobs in the formal and informal sectors, ie five per cent of the working population. 75 per cent of textiles manufactured in Africa are used in clothing.
- The Libreville 2000 report, published by the Textiles Department of the WTO (World Trade Organisation) in November of that year, says that African textile exports to developed countries, particularly Japan, the US, Canada and the EU, reached \$913 million in 1999, with 7.9 billion in clothing.
- In a 1999 report the WTO noted that African countries' textile imports represented just 7.7 per cent of the world total and that 21 per cent of African goods exported were clothes, double that of the other world players.
- Europe imports 7 to 8 times more African products than the US. This trend is set to continue in coming years, despite the African Growth and Opportunities Act, which announced a new era for trade between Africa and the US.
- In 2000, "Textiles Africains" magazine (August-September edition) named Tunisia as the world's leading supplier of clothes (particularly trousers), closely followed by Mauritius and Morocco. South Africa and Egypt are major textiles countries – the value of South African textile exports has risen from \$167 million in 1990 to \$225 million in 1999.

Unsupported potential

From Dakar to Nairobi, Accra to Johannesburg, there are many outstanding designers whose creations are as marketable as they are innovative. Names such as B'Exotiq, Ly Dumas, Collé Sow Ardo, Claire Kane, Jimmy Delaja, Eric Raisina, Clara Lawson, Oumou Sy and Pathé'O are now well known in the fashion world. Although there is no shortage of talent, textile tradition or even industrial textiles, what is lacking in Africa is a policy dealing with fashion as a sector. As a result potential backers are wary or just not interested. With the notable exceptions of Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, it seems that the vast majority of African governments cannot see the economic potential of fashion.

But developing fashion could have a very positive effect on the continent's development – subject, of course, to some basic prerequisites. Africa is crying out for the establishment of quality design and modelling colleges, the launch and promotion of

authentic African prêt-à-porter brands, increased competitiveness in the local textile industry and the adaptation of the latter to the international market – essential changes needing the involvement of the state.

A “young African” style

A truly international phenomenon, fashion brings people together, especially young people. By copying the images they see on advertisements for large, Western clothing firms, teenagers in Benin, South Africa or Antigua end up resembling their Austrian, French or Belgian counterparts. But despite the attraction of these Western designer brands – whether authentic or fake – and despite their poor buying power, which often means that they have to buy second-hand clothes, greater numbers of young Africans are dressing in their own style. This is a bold and harmonious mixture of colours, materials and cuts drawing inspiration from the West, the East and from Africa itself. It has created

a trend and a market whose exceptional potential has caught the eye of the large textile companies. So much so that some firms are venturing to predict that future summer seasons will be “ethnic-African” or nothing. In any case it is now clear that there is a market there for the taking, for the inexpensive “young African” style.

Recognised creativity

African creativity is appreciated the world over. For proof look no further than the greatest names in haute couture. Jean-Paul Gaultier, Kenzo, La Croix, Paco Rabanne, Carven and Yves Saint-Laurent have for decades taken inspiration from the African continent. Nor is it a coincidence that the United States imports millions of yards of African fabric every year. It is no longer uncommon to see the podiums at international fashion shows adorned with superb designs on magnificent materials from Madagascar, Mali, Niger or Burkina Faso. In Europe these materials are also used in interior design.

Paradoxically, African leaders seem to be the only ones who cannot see the enormous social and economic importance of the fashion industry – either through lack of vision, of information or of ambition. Instead of making do with the scraps left by the major industrial groups, it is time Africa organised itself to obtain its proper share of a business that includes the marketing of fabric, of accessories (such as pearls and cowries) and of crafts.

Former Malian Culture Minister, Aminata Traoré, tried on numerous occasions to encourage discussion on the subject. In December 1998, during the presentation of trophies by the Prince Claus Foundation¹ at the Royal Palace in Amsterdam, she called on African political decision-makers to take an interest in the fashion sector. But her appeal fell on deaf ears.

Radical changes needed with coming liberalisation

Against such a background, stories such as that of the Tantou Centre in Mali’s capital, Bamako, come as no surprise. Set up in 1981 with finance from the European Development Fund, it has thirty or so dyers and has developed around 80 shades of textile dye. Every day the Centre produces a thousand metres of bazin (a damask-type fabric) dyed in shimmering colours from white cotton fabric, generally 100 per cent cotton bazin. Through its website it receives orders from all over the world, giving it every reason to believe in its future.

And yet its founder, Tantou Kente, remains bitter: “For reasons that even the dyers themselves cannot explain, Malian cotton is sent off to Europe and then returns to Mali. Malian dyers are thus dependent on Europe for the supply of these materials whose quality they cannot control. Since the devaluation of the CFA franc in 1994, dyers have been complaining of the quality of this cotton fabric, which they have no choice but to buy...” This is the paradox: Mali is one of the world’s leading producers of cotton, but there are no factories in the country that can process the raw material.

In 2005 the world textile market will be opened up, with the end of the Multi Fibre Agreements (MFA²) and their extension, the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC). If the African

textile industry is to have any hope of benefiting, with all the other developing countries, from this liberalisation, it will have to make some radical changes and bring itself up to date. ■

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1. The Prince Claus Foundation is a Dutch NGO whose work includes the promotion of intercultural trade.

2. The first Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA) was established in 1973, imposing bilateral quotas on exports from developing countries. The aim was to achieve progressive, controlled liberalisation of trade while protecting the market from excessive impacts. Extended three times, the MFA profoundly shook up conditions of competition, not only between developing and developed countries but also within each of these categories. During the Uruguay Round negotiations, participating countries agreed to bring the sector gradually back within the GATT’s non-discrimination rules. The ATC (Agreement on Textiles and Clothing) lays down the conditions for this reintegration by 2005.

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