



Turning textile trends into an ONLINE CLOTHING EMPIRE

BY LYNSEY CHUTEL

Recognition for African fashion is finally going beyond leopard spots and zebra stripes. For his spring collection in 2011, veteran American designer Michael Kors took models straight from a Serengeti safari to the high streets of the world's fashion capitals. Months later, Japanese design house Kenzo unveiled a 2012 spring/summer collection that turned Europe's fashionistas into Masai warriors – if only for a day.

Soon other European and American haute couture designers followed suit, and the bright colors and bold patterns of African cloth found their way on to the runways of Paris, Milan and New York City.

Fashion has always had a love affair with ethnic art, but that fascination has tended to be fickle. Designers move from flowery Mexican embroidered motifs to architectural Japanese kimono silhouettes as smoothly as the seasons change.

While the applause from the front rows of fashion shows means big profits

for designers and retailers, the disapproval from the ethnic groups used as unwitting muses continues to grow.

In 2011, the Navajo Nation issued a cease-and-desist order to American retail giant Urban Outfitters. The company was ordered to remove the word 'Navajo' from a line of clothing and accessories that included a coffee flask, underwear and costume jewelry.

The Native American tribe has legally established at least 10 trademarks to ensure that its proud heritage is no longer used outside the traditional context.

"When products that have absolutely no connection to the Navajo Nation... are marketed and retailed under the guise that they are Navajo in origin, the Navajo Nation does not regard this as benign or trivial," Brian Lewis, an attorney for the tribe, told the Associated Press at the time.

Trademarking the humble kanga, however, may prove to be more difficult. Tailors whose painstaking work on traditional African garments has

been passed down through generations may find it more challenging to take ownership of their designs.

African fashion may be a burgeoning trade but dismissing it as a cottage industry would be a mistake. Prized beyond designers' ability to repurpose customary cloths in modern shapes, the continent's textile industry is worth \$400 billion. And it is expected to grow by 25% come 2020, making it a prime opportunity for African designers to take advantage of local materials.

But accessing markets on the continent remains a challenge and that's where Johannesburg-based investor Samuel Mensah noticed a prime business opportunity.

A regular traveler, Mensah would often buy pieces of fabric for friends and family as he crisscrossed the continent. But he soon realized his gifts were collecting dust as people had little time to seek out a tailor. Thus the idea of an online ready-to-wear African clothing store was born.



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Named after the Kiswahili word meaning ‘garment, suit or a well-dressed person’, e-commerce site Kisua launched in August 2013.

Mensah had found his creative director in Danica Lepen, already a force to be reckoned with in the South African fashion industry. Lepen is the co-founder of acclaimed cult label Black Coffee and the former creative director of South African high-street brand, Marion and Lindie.

“We recognized that although there is a lot of creative talent on the continent, there are many obstacles which prevent designers from going on to access the international markets,” says Mensah.

“What we aim to do is provide great quality garments at the same time as giving designers the means to be seen and heard, and the chance to make money too. We provide a commercial platform that helps them grow and open doors for them that may otherwise remain closed.”

The online boutique offers unique collections from 10 up-and-coming

designers. Working with Lepen’s creative team, the designers created Kisua’s inaugural collection of African print dresses. They range in style and cut from 50s flare and A-line to pencil skirts and drawstring shirt dresses.

“It’s been a really interesting process. We’re really happy with the outcome because I think we’ve stayed true to the designers’ aesthetics and integrity but at the same time we have a consistent Kisua signature threaded through all the collections, which is about keeping the clothes modern, wearable and to a high quality standard,” Lepen enthuses.

Kisua’s business model is structured so that the designers do not shoulder the manufacturing costs. They receive a cut of every item sold as well as an additional compensation.

“We are trying to break the mold. We want the creative people of this continent to help us shape the new African aesthetic,” says Lepen. The e-commerce site not only acts as a

storefront for international customers in 150 countries, it is also trying to position itself as a back office for a collective of designers.

Along with the manufacturing and distribution capabilities, Kisua also exposes young designers to industry experts. These include renowned tailor and designer Ozwald Boateng; former CEO of textile company Vlisco, Joop van der Meij; and the founder of Lagos Fashion Week, Omoyemi Akerele. All three sit on Kisua’s board.

Many promising African designers wait for the invitation to showcase their wares on the fringes of international fashion weeks, hoping to attract a buyer who will convince retailers to carry their labels.

While e-commerce doesn’t have the glamour and spectacle of a fashion week, initiatives with integrity and vision like Kisua mean new designers are only a click away from a growing customer base and direct financial benefit. **FW**