Black empowerment stirs the rise of African fashion

By Astrid Wendlandt - 16 April 2019

For his graduation from University of Cape Town, 24-year-old finance student Tumelo Mahlare is not aiming to wear a Zegna or a Valentino suit but a colorful outfit from Maxhosa by Laduma, one of South Africa’s rising fashion stars. For now, Mahlare can only afford the brand's popular 13-euro multi-colored patterned socks but he plans to save enough money to treat himself to a 700-euro complete Maxhosa look by the time he finishes his degree.

The upmarket South African fashion brand appeals to young men like Mahlare because it taps into a growing desire to display the continent’s rich and authentic heritage. Maxhosa is not trying to copy Western designs but rather captures one of the many facets of the black empowerment movement that has been gaining traction in Africa and beyond. Maxhosa interprets into modern knitwear traditional beadwork patterns, symbolism and colors of the Khosa people, one of South Africa’s biggest ethnic groups.

“I am really inspired by Laduma even though I am not in fashion,” says Mahlare’s friend Sashin Pillay Gonzalez, 24, who is leaving Cape Town next month for Dublin to work for Google. The two young men were sitting next to one another at Maxhosa’s fashion show in Cape Town on Friday night, which was attended by several high-profile figures including fashion critic Suzy Menkes (in town for the Conde Nast International luxury conference) and South African mining billionaire Patrice Motsepe.

“South Africans are definitely much more into wearing South African brands than ever before. I think that it has taken a while, post-Apartheid and colonialism, for South Africans to be really proud of where they are from and who they really are,” says Gonzalez, wearing a 150-euro Maxhosa shirt.
Maxhosa by Laduma, a brand started less than a decade ago, is now sold in many cities in Africa as well as the Shop at the Blue Bird in London; the Onchek, an online retailer based in the United States specialized in luxury African fashion and The Native Nation concept store in Lyon, France. Maxhosa is the best performing African fashion brand sold at Merchants on Long, a concept store specialized in African design and Africa-sourced produce nestled in the heart of Cape Town. It was founded by Hanneli Rupert, daughter of Johann Rupert, chairman and controlling shareholder of Cartier and Chloe-owner Richemont. Rupert is one of many who have believed in the success of Laduma Ngxokolo ever since he founded his Maxhosa brand.

“It's been great to see the attitude change towards African fashion,” says Hanneli Rupert. “It's gone from having been something specific to a worldwide interest and we have been one of the voices speaking out for African designers and showcasing their work.”

Ngxokolo, now 32, says he saw a gap on the African continent and among expats abroad for products that were “distinctly African, bold and outstanding.” The young designer obtained a scholarship to complete a masters' degree in material futures at London's Central St. Martins that was partly funded by WeTransfer. He has won many prizes, including the Vogue Italia Scouting for Africa award in 2015. Ngxokolo says he is excited that this year, two of the eight finalists for the LVMH fashion prize come from Africa: Thebe Magugu from South Africa and...
Kenneth Ize from Nigeria. But he added about the nominations: “I hope that this is not a compliance choice.”

“I feel a buzz around African fashion but if they were really serious, we would see more African brands in Galeries Lafayette or at Liberty in London, and they would have concessions, not just pop-ups,” says Ngxokolo. He thinks interest is held back by concerns about how long these new African brands will last and how quickly they can deliver stock.

Ngxokolo points out that some of the many challenges African designers face include access to high-quality manufacturing and fabrics which often have to be imported - even leather. Hides leave Africa to be tanned in Europe and sent back to Africa. He says some designers get their clothes and accessories manufactured in Spain, Portugal or Italy to ensure high quality. The young designer solved his production problem by acquiring a factory in
Johannesburg two years ago for which he borrowed big sums from friends from around the world but which he managed to quickly pay back. “I believe that paying your dues is a high priority,” he explains.

Ngxokolo is one of a handful of African designers receiving advice from Uche Pézard, a well-established luxury consultant based in Paris, originally from Nigeria, who founded Luxury Connect Africa, a platform to help African designers develop their business and showcase their work. She organized for some African brands, including Maxhosa and Tiffany Amber, to present their wares at the Bristol hotel in Paris during fashion week in 2018 as well as last March and intends to continue to do so during every ready-to-wear fashion week.

“There is a lot of noise about African fashion,” says Pézard. “But the reality is that we are just at the beginning.” She compares Africa to where China was 10-15 years ago, explaining that back then, in China, there was also little infrastructure and the fashion eco-system was not very developed yet. “Today, there are no best practices in Africa, no benchmark, no infrastructure but everything will fall into place, step by step. We just need to follow our path.”

It took 20 years for Tiffany Amber, the first ready-to-wear label in Nigeria, to get to where it is now with a steady production infrastructure and stockists all around Africa as well as in Paris, the US and London. Folake Coke, founder and creative director of Tiffany Amber, says her focus now is on the African continent.

“I honestly believe that nobody can dress an African better than an African,” she says. “Africans love style, they love fashion. Even the women in the street selling something to make an income want to look good. It is not a status thing.” Amber is planning to triple the size of her production unit in Lagos over the next few years to meet demand. “We want to conquer Africa and then spread our wings all over the world.”
Ituen Basi, creative director of her eponymous brand, shares the same ambitions. She wants to build a strong presence in Africa before expanding into foreign markets. “The fashion industry is still in its infancy stage in Nigeria. We have made big steps but we still have a lot to do,” Basi explains. She says African designers struggle to get access to showrooms and retail infrastructure. Also, in spite of many initiatives, she finds that there isn’t enough capital available for young fashion brands. “Potential investors do not understand how this industry functions and that your return on investment will take some time,” Basi explains.

Abrima Erwiah, who was raised in New York and worked in marketing and communications at Bottega Veneta, co-founded Studio 189, an artisan-produced fashion brand that is headquartered in Ghana, West Africa and New York. It currently operates a store in New York and Accra (Ghana), an e-commerce site, a manufacturing facility in Accra, and supports various community-led projects in Africa and in the US. It works with artisanal communities that specialize in various traditional craftsmanship techniques including natural plant-based dye indigo and hand-batik. Studio 189 partners with the United Nations ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative, NYU Stern School of Business and has collaborated with brands including EDUN, which was part of LVMH, and the retailer Yoox Net-A-Porter.

“I think people want to know who’s making their products and how it impacts and affects people and the environment,” explains Erwiah. She is one of many betting that one day, fashion will become a major provider of jobs and revenues for Africans and that the continent will become known for more than just oil, gas and diamonds but also for its fashion designers and craftsmanship.