Africa's Design Industry: From Creative Pursuits to the Business of Fashion

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Africa has inspired Western fashion and visual culture for decades. Constant appropriation of African design and textile ingenuity by the global fashion industry moves profits abroad and subverts cultural dynamics. However, a new generation of African designers has begun and is gaining global recognition and pioneering strategies to market and brand fashion concepts grounded in cultural heritage.

I will focus on strategies to legitimize, strengthen and protect Africa's design industry: protecting intellectual cultural property, and building foundational structures to support a continent-wide fashion industry with the capacity to grow, thrive, and contribute strategically to economic growth. My interdisciplinary approach draws upon interviews, Afropolitan media, design blogs, and my own collaborations with entrepreneurs in communities that have emerged as art and design centers in Ghana and Senegal. I analyze global fashion dynamics in terms of connections between the realms of creative design, economics (marketing, patterns of production, market segmentation, business development, and entrepreneurship), and social anthropology (economic and political organization, law, and patterns of consumption and exchange).

A more formalized textile and design industry needs to be nurtured to get African products to local, regional, and global consumers. Small- and medium-scale clothing and textile entrepreneurs already contribute to Africa's economic development, particularly in Nigeria, South Africa, and Ghana. To become competitive, profitable, and sustainable, the next steps include developing marketable design content, deepening business processes and mechanisms of mass production, and establishing effective marketing and distribution channels. Government support to develop and promote cultural industries is vital; relevant strategies need to be consistently integrated into national development agendas. I close by looking at emerging best practices from South Africa's Clothing and Textiles Competitiveness Programme (CTCP) initiative and African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) among other initiatives, to explore what African designers need to make the jump to standardization and mass production for larger markets.