

Thinking Through the Growth of The Fashion Design Industry in Kenya

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Abstract

This research aimed at investigating the foundation and environment that surrounded the government directive to the public to wear African clothes every Friday. It sought to unearth information on the status of the fashion industry in Kenya. Data was collected from media reports, internet sources and available literature coupled with information from the Kenya Fashion Council, in which the author serves as a council member. The findings indicate that Kenya, does not have a strong indigenous textile production history and depends on fabric mainly from West Africa; designers used cultural, style, handcrafted finishes and natural fabrics in their fashion products; and, government, models, institutions and red carpet events are important to the industry growth. The failure of the Kenya national dress was due to several factors, including omission of the Maasai shuka. The Kenya Fashion Council is expected to mobilize resources necessary to develop a vibrant fashion industry.

Keywords: Fashion designers, African fabric, Kenya national dress, Maasai shuka, Kenya Fashion Council.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2019, the Kenya Government issued a directive that all public officers wear African garments every Friday. The justification for this was explained as:

'The ethos of this re-engagement speaks to an assertion of an affirmative African narrative that defines our Africanness and insists that at its core, its manifestations and reflections - being African is best. Clothing is a tool for self-expression, social activism and public diplomacy. World leaders often wear traditional clothing to interact with foreign publics and to advance cultural understanding.' (Amolo, 2019).

This was another effort to jumpstart an interest and consumption of African wear after earlier attempts failed. The government further added that people should use the local fashion as a tool for diplomacy and to generate interest in the country's heritage. The directive elicited a lot of public debate with many critics saying that the political goodwill was a good signal for the local fashion design and textile industry (Komu, 2020). The industry was one of the worst affected with stiff competition from the more efficient Asian

and European markets coupled with influx of cheaper second hand clothes imports. It was seen that an organized fashion industry would see revitalization of the textile production companies, proper legal framework, government incentives, protection, structuring and improved training, among other things.

In more developed economies, fashion is recognized as a reflection of cultural identity and provides export opportunities. Several countries in Africa have developed distinctive national dresses that are iconic to them such as Rwanda, Uganda and Nigeria. Attempts to develop a Kenya National dress was not fruitful. This research looked at some reasons and highlights some successful cases like the *basuuti* of Uganda.

Various institutions have a role to play in the development of the fashion industry. The National Museums of Kenya and African Heritage House have been instrumental in preserving culture and promoting the same by exposing the fabrics, models, jewellery and accessories that contribute towards a vibrant fashion industry. The emergence of the Kenya Fashion Council (2019) is a major

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