CONCEPTUALIZING DESIGN PHILOSOPHIES: CONTEMPORARY CULTURALLY-MOTIVATED AFRICAN FASHION DESIGNERS

Volume 3, September 2021 **Pages: 95 - 109**
ISSN: 2665-0983 (ONLINE) **DOI: 10.35738/ftr.v3.2021.06**

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ABSTRACT

Fashion design from Africa and by culturally-inclined African designers provides a rich source of information about networks of inspiration and influence. This paper thematically analysed fashion products of five selected contemporary culturally inclined *haute couture* designers from Ghana, to make meaning of their design philosophies. The motivation was the need to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversation on the impact of Africa on fashion with focus on the work of unsung designers from the continent.

Keywords: Africa; Culturally-Inclined Fashion Designers; Fashion Inspiration; Ghana, Impact of African Fashion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fashion is a widely recognised phenomena the world over, and there are many exciting and important current developments in the field of African fashion. However available literature show that African fashion from Africa [Ghana] have not yet received much academic attention from African scholars despite the exciting and important current developments in the field of African fashion (Damalie, 2019; Rovine, 2016; Ryan, 2015; Richards, 2015; Delhaye & Woets, 2015; Kwakye-Opong, 2011; Gott & Loughran, 2010).

The paper, therefore, seeks to review the works of some contemporary culturally motivated haute couture fashion designers to make meaning of their design philosophies to further shape a study on creating destination-inspired dress collection. The paper is also intended as a scholarly contribution to ongoing conversation on the impact of African fashion. The paper further analysed the conceptualizing philosophies (inspiration and influence) of five (5) contemporary culturally-motivated haute couture fashion designers' work, describing how the findings are applicable in designing a contemporary destination-inspired collection. The paper is based on three (of four) consumer fashion adoption theories which has Sproles (1979) as its main proponent (Rahman et al., 2014). Rahman et al. (2014) used all four of Sproles' (1979) to assess consumer's fashion adoption behaviour regarding new products in Pakistan, arguing that it is a key point for researchers. This paper used the theoretical lens of the sub-cultural innovation theory which explains culture's ability to spread new fashion among the people. The second theory innovation-collective explains that individuals who are creative and innovative are treated as the leaders in fashion because their choices and styles are socially acceptable, while the third trickle across theory is concerned particularly (in this paper) with the mass communication about fashion information for the social classes in the society. This theory proposes that every class has its leader that has a great influence on them when it comes to fashion as compared to any other person.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research approach is inductive and of qualitative paradigm, using descriptive design. Trends and thematic methods are used for analysing data.

2.1 Trends Review

This first section of the review of contemporary culturally-motivated haute couture fashion designers' work looks at the KCascades Impressions label, soft, easy fitting clothes; ethnocentrically consequential occasional wear with cross cultural attraction designed to evolve into and influence many other styles. The fashion designer, Sussie

Aku Damalie, based in Takoradi and Accra, Ghana, makes long, soft flowing skirt suits and gowns made of unique native-inspired African prints or wax cloth and lace fabrics, created under her signature brand name KCascades Impressions. Each garment under the soft clothing label is colourful, has simple neck details, and slim fitted blouse cut details with emphasis on the sensual hourglass body shape. The sleeves are either short kimono cuts, or of three-quarter-lengths inserted sleeve types with ballooned puff (drum-stick sleeves) or variety of pleated cuff attachments (some with bow-tie effects in the case of the latter).

The skirts parts are waist-fitted flare cuts with wrap effects or flare with zipper openings. The zipper positions on the designs are alternated to suit the clients taste and mood. The hems of the dress are either weighted with dramatic chain-stitched mono-filament attachments or double layered and stitched. The brand uses minimal sewing to reflect the source of inspiration (Damalie, 2019). The made-to-measure dress category is mostly made to be used for formal environments during summer and spring, explaining its lightness for comfort and ease. The merchandising philosophy is fashion innovation and creativity consistent with the non-routine design philosophy as described in Evbuomwan, Sivaloganathan and Jebb (1996).

The design philosophy is influenced by her culture milieu and what is going on in her field and in the wider creative and cultural realm (Bowstead, 2011). The designer's creative philosophy of innovation, quality and appreciation of African culture remains the cornerstone of her artistic investigations and experimentations. Hence, her signature brand's niche is classic, ethnic-inspired wear with a twist. Her target is the matured female fashion innovator, the rarely catered for plus size woman with hourglass shape. The designer's brand fits well into the dress conventions of Ghanaian [African] society, and for consumers who enjoy indigenous cultures.

Below in Figures 1, 2, and 3 are pictorials of the designs recently exhibited at the Faculty of Applied Arts (FAAT) week at the Takoradi Technical University. The KCascades impression label was mainly inspired by the native (outdooring) dress of the passage rite of the people of Tema, the red fish (*tsile*) season, the fishing net, and the sea waves

which define the hardworking people of Tema, their location and their ancestral occupation of fishing.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1 shows variants of the *KCascades Impressions* styles; a classic occasional wear with cross cultural attraction for a matured, adventure-loving Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian tourist. The style has a radiant yellow feathered lace and satin blouse and imitated kente print wrap skirt with mono-filament chain stitched hem.

Figure 2 is the style rendered in a radiant yellow pique blouse and imitated kente print wrap skirt with plain stitched hem. All blouses could be worn to hang on the skirts.



Figure 3

Figure 3 is model is styled to reflect both contemporary ethnic [Ghanaian and Nigerian] and Western influencing trends (multi-pleated Gele head dress using the kente print inspired by Ghanaian hand-woven design, beaded earrings and necklace, metallic bungle, dangling peal earrings and rich golden pair of stiletto).

2.2 Thematic Analysis

The design appraisal in the case of the KCascades impression label shows that the designer's work was mainly inspired by the native (outdooring) dress of the passage rite of the people of Tema, the red fish (*tsile*) season, the fishing net, and the sea waves which define the hardworking people of Tema, their location and their ancestral occupation of fishing co-opted into design theme (Damalie, 2018).

The rite of passage maidens use the hand woven Asante kente fabric during the outdooring ceremony. Therefore, the use of the kente printed was heavily influenced by the maidens' use of the cloth. However, because the designer sought to reach across cultural divides to attract the target consumer, she complemented the fabrication with

exotic fabrics such as feather-motif woven lace fabrics influenced by the feathery body marks used for beautification on the maidens as blouses. The satin blouse worn under the lace acts in harmony with the lace to show a solid backing and adds a complementary sheen in the background. The pique fabric for the second blouse has tiny square boxes on the surface. This was equally influenced by the net used for the fishing season during which the rites of passage was held. This exotic fabric, is also meant to represent other cultures. Thus, two different cultural sensibilities are firmly recognized and echoed in the fabric choices for the product to achieve the design goal.

The skirt composition is inspired by the way the hand woven kente is worn by the maidens. They drape the fabric around their waist and the fabric is secured with a strap of fabric referred to as *hao*. It is presented in the new look as an inserted waistband to secure the skirt on the waistline. The tie of the waistband unlike the *hao* is however overtly done and further tied into a bow for emphasis, clearly an innovation of the function of the *hao* and creativity in the prominent look it is further given. The bow effect can be done either on the side or at the small of the back of the figure, laying emphasis on specific sides of the waistline (side or back).

The bustle (*atofo*) is worn as a foundation garment to shape the draped cloth forms an exaggerated-buttocks and helps in creating an hourglass shape, hence the manipulation of the kente print cloth used for the wrap to create volume. The process further creates the hang of the skirt observed at the hem (Figure 1 & 2). This further contributes to the ease and comfort in the wear of the skirt. The flare cut also allows for the wrap effect observable in the direction in which the maiden's wrap their cloth (right over left). The *KCascades impressions* wrap skirt can however be worn in a reverse form, that is left over right or in similar fashion as desired.

The appropriation of techniques such as gathers and pleats are influenced by the fins of the fish as well as in the folds created while wrapping the excess fabric allowed above the waist of the maidens to be wound over the strap (*hao*) on one hand, and the straight line formed with the top layer of the cloth. These are simulated to manage deliberately introduced excess fabric as design details, that is, on collar, and cuff for the blouse (Figure 3).

The design ease makes room for two other sizes (of smaller and bigger than British Standard 14) of the dress, which also hints of sustainable fashion in the uniqueness. For instance, the fabrics used are rarely cut in such silhouettes. Again, the feathery lace blouse has sides drapery effect allowed to create a drapery look inspired by the trunk of the fish. This is also meant to emphasise the hip of the wearer giving it a seductive look. Thus, the red fish (*tsile*), fishing net, and sea waves co-opted into design theme are all reflected in the design details.

Western sensibilities are seen in the use the back-button closure used for the blouses, but the gold nature is influenced by the gold jewellery heavily used by the maidens. The shapes of the buttons are also influenced by the shapes of the beaded jewellery used by the maidens. The buttons thus play a dual role of securing the openings as well decorating the blouses.

The target market of the brand is high-end culturally-inclined fashion forward mature woman with love for culture, and of the plus size. The attempt is to create a niche for the product.

2.3 Trends Review

The second section reviews trends of the work of the four young creative African [Ghanaian] designers, Emmanuel Achambisa, Kabu Asem, Gracilla Akade Yeboah and Ebenezer Arthur. Their works are inspired by the *Agbada* ensemble, a dress patronised in the Ghanaian society but originates from Nigeria (Kwashie, 2020).

September 2021 - Fashion And Textiles Review, ISSN: 2665-0983



Figure 4. *Sapara Agbada*

Figure 4 is the three-piece *Sapara Agbada* Renditions by 2020 graduating class of young African designers/ models, Takoradi Technical University.



Figure 5 Sapara Agbada

Source: Fashion Pundits (2020).

September 2021 - Fashion And Textiles Review, ISSN: 2665-0983

Figure 5 is designer/model showcasing yet another renditions of *Sapara Agbada* Fashion (one shoulder) on Caftan and a pair of slim fitted Trousers.

The innovative traditional ceremonial *Sapara Agbada* (Kwashie, 2020) produced by the designers/models presented in Figure 4 are three-piece styled garments produced by young graduating fashion designers from the Takoradi Technical University (Fashion Pundits, 2020). All the four designs are rendered in pair of trousers and slim fitted tops (featuring long and short sleeves). The fabrics used range from sequined lace to plain voile and cotton prints. The caftan tops have round neck and mandarin collars respectively while the long sleeved have snugly fitted cuffs (Figure 4 & 5). The *Agbada* tops are relatively loose, consistent with the typical Yoruba *Sapara* style (Kwashie, 2020).

The large loose have however been rendered in different forms at the neck cuts, full front, front opening and extent of coverage as interesting details. The mainly geometric cuts necklines vary in shapes. Three of the styles (Figure 4) have no front opening very much like the traditional *Agbada.* The other two (in Figure 4 & 5) show different orientations. One has a wide front opening showing a unique look from the rest (in Figure 4), while the other in Figure 5 is a unique one shoulder piece, more of a shoulder drapery typical of men's *Akojan* (toga style *Ga* cloth drapery worn by men).

Decorative neck facing, the colour play puzzle-like geometrically shaped patchwork, traditional embroidery, and Far Eastern frog fastening details have been used to create the *Sapara Agbada* renditions making them unique and varied. The looks created by the designers in cut, hang, as well as the embellishment present the native Yoruba and Hausa dress in a youthfully innovative and creative cross gender (unisex) fashion, showing how young African designers can use sub-culture (Sproles, 1979) as cited in Rahman et al. (2014) to spread fashion among conscious fashion forward youth. The innovative traditional ceremonial *Sapara Agbada* produced by the designers presented (in Figure 4 & 5) are fully accessorized with slippers, African wrist beads, walking stick, soft hat (*fula*), hair styles and make up.

2.4 Thematic Analysis

The trend review in the case of the *Sapara Agbada* rendition show that the work of the four young African designers were mainly inspired by the *Agbada* a native dress of Nigerians (Yoruba and Hausa land) (Kwashie, 2020). However, the *Sapara Agbada* from Yoruba land in particular influenced the cut of the styles reviewed. Regarding fabric used, even though African print was used in for the collar and cuffs of the last style (Figure 5), Western influence can be seen playing a major role in the main fashion fabrics used in making the dress. Ghanaian fabric appropriation technique, which also hints of sustainable fashion known in Ghana as *Asasa* is exemplified in the patchwork technique employed in the second style (from right to left).

Asian regional sensibilities can be also seen the frog closure used for the first style (Figure 4 from right). The models reflect the target market that is, high-end culturally-inclined fashion forward youth with a clear display of a 'mind of their own.'



Figure 6: Model/ Co-designer in the *Unification* ball dress
Source: The Culture & Costume Fashion Review, 2021

2.5 Trends Review

The third section reviews a project commissioned by the designers Gracilla Akade Yeboah and Sussie Aku Damalie. The elegant, conceptualized *Unification* design was made for a prominent Tanzanian leader (as a guest) attending the inaugural ball to celebrate the election and swearing into office of the first ever Black woman of Asian descent, Kamala Harris as USA Vice President. The evening ball is meant to celebrate the Vice President, Black women and indeed people of colour. The motivation for this design is to push the African fashion agenda on the world fashion stage using local resources including those from Kamala's varied background as source of inspiration.

The design was thus inspired by multi-native dress practices of Asia, Jamaica and Tanzania, considering style lines and fabric choices, which address the ancient African cultural descent of the celebrant and also the invited guest. The ball dress in Figure 6 is made up of a blend of exquisite plain black velvet, tulle, colourful African print fabric and beads. The fabric has a blend of elements of African and other regional cultures. The bustier caped floor length dress is unique. It has a long Indian sari-influenced shoulder cape attachment also reflecting Asian culture. The front has fringed features on the deep right cut drawn from Dagota women of Tanzanian's traditional dress. Thus, the ball dress reflects the rich African creativity, materials and ideas which serves as inspiration and nourishment to African designers (Moroso, 2010).

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The designs reviewed are inspired by West African clothing culture of Ghana and Nigeria. Damalie's source of inspiration was a native passage rite clothing used by maidens during the outdooring ceremony (after a week-long grooming and cleansing activities - *Ashin Yoo Kpèèmo Kpojeei Hesaamo*). The student-designers were inspired by a high-end staple clothing for men, *Agbada* which continue to evolve in style and patronage (Kwashie, 2020). Gracilla and Sussie's ball dress was also inspired by a Tanzanian native dress with hints of the celebrant's native backgrounds. The design practices are consistent with other culturally–inclined designers such as Maimouna

Diallo, Chez Julie and Ayesha Ayensu (of Mali and Ghana respectively) whose key innovations are drawn from their explorations of dress practices within their own cultural milieu and elsewhere in Africa (Rovine, 2016; Ryan, 2015; Richards, 2015).

The clothing styles reviewed fall within the non-routine design category (Evbuomwan, Sivaloganathan & Jebb, 1996), showing innovation; that is a resemblance of the origins of inspiration presented in another way, and also creativity; new and original cut, use of elements and principles of design, techniques and decorative details to give native dress a fresh perspective. All the culturally inclined styles reviewed fits into audacious contemporary occasional wear, and are graceful in look and wear. The colours used are contemporary, unique, exciting and interesting.

The target market for all the works of the designers reviewed in this paper used native culture dress practices as key inspiration in designing culturally-inclined fashion for a small segment of consumers (Burns et al., 2016) who are referred to as fashion forward consumers (including a tourist and a Politian/ diplomat). The resulting products adequately demonstrate the viability of sub-culture in spreading fashion among creative and influential target consumers. Their endorsement of such brand become effective tools for communicating and promoting such labels to the target market with similar characteristics and values (matured and young fashion innovators respectively with love for culture). The selected target consumers may have to adopt a 'mind-of-their-own' attitude to diffuse the brands, since they look unique and might draw a lot of attention to themselves.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The paper thematically analysed fashion products of five selected contemporary culturally-inclined *haute couture* designers from Ghana, to make meaning of their design philosophies, that is, their sources of inspiration, influences and target markets. The theoretical lens of the sub-cultural innovation is identified in the nature of African native dress practices each designer used as their sources of inspiration; the rite of passage dress of *Temamei*, the *Sapara Agbada* of Nigeria, and the dress of Tanzanian

Dagota women respectively. Innovation-collective theory determined each designer's use of a fashion innovator as their market segmentation and their subsequent use as models in implicit and explicit terms show their choice of strategy to create awareness about their unique products.

Even though the designers' distinctive designs were mainly inspired by native dress culture practices from within Africa, there were hints of cultural borrowing from the West and Far East in the designs. The designs had resemblance to the influencing clothing but were different in look. The designers' target of fashion innovators remain consistent with *haute couture* practice. Further, the designers' use of unique, expensive and visually appealing fabrics, and decorative techniques sought to create unique products. The design-led products were made-to-measure or customised in fit thus targeted specific sizes. The works or designs of the culturally-inclined African designers reviewed provide a rich source of information about their networks of inspiration and influence. The findings are all insightful hints and can be adopted variously for designing contemporary destination-inspired collections based also on the desired outcomes of designers.

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