



words: **MIRANDA HINKLEY**

ASCHObI DESIGNS: *Exclusively inclusive*

Offering a modern twist to vintage 1960s African couture, Aschobi Designs is building bridges from Freetown to the fashion capitals of the world.

From the outside, Adama Kai Kargo's small shop on the Pademba Road looks much like any other tailoring business in Freetown, with the gentle hum of sewing machines and piles of cotton fabric with orders stapled to them. But look a little closer and you'll see that this isn't your usual tailors. Mixing a West African sensibility for colour, print and ornament with all the hard tailoring of Parisian couture, Aschobi Designs is a laboratory of style, created in Africa but with international appeal.

Fresh out of fashion school in Paris and New York, with the world her oyster, Adama decided on the capital of Sierra Leone as the location to launch her first enterprise. "I came back to gather myself together and figure out how to pursue my design career," explains Adama, "and also to set up a business that would provide jobs for people locally and give something back to my community. And as hard as it's going to be, instead of put my energy into developing someone else's brand, I decided to start my own."

As you might expect, setting up a business in Freetown has been far from easy. Roads and basic infrastructure aside, there's little in the way of a local fashion industry. "There isn't really the kind of infrastructure you need for the production of garments, as there is in Ghana or Nigeria. But as the months go by, the business is developing. It's bitter at times but the sweetness always comes around, and that evens out the taste."

At just over a year old, it seems that Aschobi Designs is already outgrowing the Pademba Road. With large orders coming in from Europe and America, Adama is beginning to think global. "I'm starting to think about a factory and about training people to make the clothes. I'm aiming at a pret-a-porter, luxury brand. But my styles aren't traditional, African costume. Depending on how you style the clothes, any of my pieces will work for you. It's a global style that will stand on the street in Trinidad just as well as in Toronto, and just as well as any other brand."

Looking at the clothes, it's hard to disagree. There has to be room in every wardrobe for that one-off blazer in a unique wax-cloth print, to say nothing of the frocks – think Audrey Hepburn parties in downtown

Kinshasa. What stands out is the combination of well-cut, wearable styles, with an exquisite eye for detail; and her way of using traditional cloths like cotton or linen, with the latest metallic fibres.

And this is the essence of Aschobi style. In fact, it relates to an African concept enshrined in the very name of the company: Aschobi is a play on the Yorubà term *aso èbì*. "It's a concept that's practiced throughout West Africa. If there's some sort of event, like a wedding, or a funeral, and people want to be identified together, they'll wear the same fabric. And in fact *aso èbì* is also a term for the cloth itself. People might wear it in different styles, but the fabric is the same. So it's a way of being exclusively inclusive."

It's easy to see how this notion is a good fit for a small, boutique label – rooted in a particular sense of style, and yet so accessible. Adama also makes more literal use of the concept of *aso èbì*. "With my company, each season I'll pick a particular cotton print that'll be worked into the collection as a key fabric for the season. And there'll be jacket, and dresses, all from that one print."

The path Adama has chosen certainly isn't a well-trodden one, nor perhaps the most direct, but it's a bottom. So what's her advice to young designers leaving college right now? "Be persistent! Do not let people derail you from where you're trying to go. If you really believe in yourself, in the strength of your ideas, go for it. Also listen to advice from other people who have done it, or are doing it. And don't forget to try new things. If you fail at least you're experimenting. But do what's best for you. If your goal is to work for J Crew then go for that. Don't feel like you owe anybody anything. There's no point in trying to achieve someone else's goal."

Ashobi Design, 17 Pademba Road, Freetown.
www.facebook.com/pages/Aschobi-Designs
www.aschobishop.com

