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Adama Kai makes a fashion statement in Sierra Leone

FREETOWN - Women carrying corn on their heads and children selling peanuts stop to stare as a leggy model in a tiny blue dress strikes a pose outside a steel-doored clothes shop in Sierra Leone's capital.

Adama Kai, a fashion designer trained in New York and Paris, organized the photo shoot to promote her new store and company, Aschobi Designs. The 25-year-old has eschewed job prospects in the developed world to come home and follow her dream.

"Maybe I have more opportunities as a designer over there, but I'm making a bigger statement over here," said Kai, who was born in New Jersey but moved to Sierra Leone shortly afterward and lived there until she was 4.

"In the same way that Ralph Lauren stands for America, Chanel for France, and Versace for Italy, I want Aschobi to stand for African fashion," she said.

Her store is tucked between a small printing shop and a newspaper office in hilly Freetown's hectic downtown.

"I know this is the last place you'd expect to find haute couture. But I want to replace all of this darkness of the past with beauty," she said.

Sierra Leone, ranked the world's least developed country by the United Nations, is recovering from a 1991-2002 civil war that shocked the world with images of drugged-up child soldiers hacking off villagers' limbs with machetes.

An estimated 30 percent to 50 percent of skilled Sierra Leoneans fled the conflict, in which 50,000 people were killed.

But slowly some of those people are trickling back - mirroring a continent-wide trend that has seen educated Africans return to take advantage of business opportunities in fast growing economies.

"Everybody thinks I should be in Paris, London, or New York," said Kai, who attended the same fashion school as designers Marc Jacobs and Donna Karan. She worked in New York as a styling assistant on Flaunt magazine and later handled creative portfolios for a management agency.

"I've given up a lot to be here and I miss Paris and the fashion life in America. But this is really important to me," said Kai, who launched her business in January. "This is my only job. This is my life, actually."

Most of Sierra Leone's diaspora, estimated to be between 750,000 and 1 million, is still abroad, and the remittances they send home are worth around \$250 million

a year. An estimated 50,000 have returned since the war ended.

When she was 4, Kai moved with her mother, who worked for the United Nations, to Ethiopia. At 13, she went to a boarding school in the United States. She later studied fashion for two years in Paris and one in New York.

Dressed in a brown suit with her hair twisted into dreadlocks, Kai knows she stands out in the Freetown crowd.

Her designs are even bolder - a profusion of greens, oranges, yellows, and pinks in bold shapes, the clothes combine expertly draped African prints with modern design influences.

"It's like all of it was inside waiting to burst out for so long," she said.

Her dresses cost between \$30 and \$100 - a princely sum in a country where average gross domestic product per capita is \$216.

In her shop, also called Aschobi Designs, middle-class Sierra Leoneans and expatriates browse the clothes hanging from wooden racks, surrounded by stacks of international fashion magazines, including editions of Vogue from all over the world.

"I think what I am doing is in line with anyone coming here to open a school or a hospital," said Kai. "I know it is enriching this country."