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Diaspora Dress: Creating a Fashion Industry in Sierra Leone

21 September 2008: Adama Kai calls it the diaspora dress. Whether they see it hanging in her shop window or happen to witness Kai herself marching its proud neckline down the street, everyone has a single question: Where can I get one?

Because the diaspora dress has a habit of cropping up in unexpected places, always new yet always familiar – new skins wrapped up in the same cloth.

“I can be standing on the street waiting for a taxi, and I’ll see a lady walking right past me, and she will be wearing the exact same material as me. Only she has some peanuts on her head that she’s selling. Meanwhile I’m standing there with my glamorous dress that I might sell to someone in Paris,” Kai said in a phone interview with MediaGlobal from her shop in Freetown. “I’m taking traditional, and I’m taking it to a different place.”

That is the thing about the diaspora dress: it belongs to everyone and no one at once. That is the thing about cloth: you cut your own pattern from the same patch of threads.

Kai, herself a product of the Sierra Leonean diaspora and lately its prodigal daughter, knows about the sort of dispersal at the word’s root: flung halfway across the world and back, shape-shifting across multiple continents, clothing became her singular constant amidst a childhood spanning Freetown, Adis Ababa, and New York.

“As a child, I would help my mother get ready for work by helping her pick out her outfit the night before. It was fun,” the 25-year-old designer recalled of her foray into fashion. “All the moving left me in a constant mode of adjusting, but I got a taste of what lived within me. My clothes prepared me for all the different places and situations I encountered.”

Kai’s clothing line Aschobi reflects the dizzying kaleidoscope of the landscapes she has known. It draws on traditional African silhouettes, then coyly inverts them. Its bold hues and sweeping shapes manage to hinge on their subtle details: a winsome pleat, a dash of gold. Kai’s influences span from the vintage 1950’s African couture of Dakar and Bamako to Maya Angelou’s “Phenomenal Woman”. She hopes, she says, to bring African culture into mainstream fashion, “moving the African from the exotic to the everyday.”

After graduating from Parson School of Design in Paris, Kai made the decision to return to Sierra Leone to launch her own line, Aschobi Designs. “I definitely didn’t plan it very well,” she remarked. “I was basically like, ‘I wanna move, I wanna, move, I wanna move,’ and then finally I was like, ‘Okay, I’m gonna quit my job.’ So I quit my job and I moved home and I started the business with my

best friend.”

The Sierra Leone Kai returned to was no longer a country known for its beauty. Though the small coastal country is one of stunning white beaches and rolling hills, for most of the world, its eleven-year civil war rendered it synonymous with the starkest illustrations of human brutality: severed limbs and drugged-up packs of child soldiers have come to be known as the conflict’s particular claims to modern atrocity.

But Kai, whose daily commute takes her past gunshot-riddled buildings and young men begging in wheelchairs, believes beauty lurks in unexpected places. She is part of a small but growing number of Sierra Leonean expatriates returning to rebuild their country. Though Sierra Leone has made remarkable strides since the war’s end in 2000, it still ranks lowest in the world on the United Nations Human Development Index. Remarking on her determination to play an active role in the country’s progress, Kai said, “Honestly, I haven’t even been here a year yet, but I know I’m doing the right thing.”

So far, Kai says, the reception in Sierra Leone has generally been one of guarded intrigue, with some older clientele finding the designs a bit in excess of social norms. “Most definitely the younger generation here is soaking it all up,” she noted, “but older customers sometime feel a hemline is not appropriate or maybe the deep cuts or the backless dress is not something they’re used to wearing.”

Another thing many are not used to is the price. A typical Freetown tailor shop charges about 30,000 leones – roughly ten dollars – for a dress. The Aschobi line starts at 50,000. In many ways, Kai admits, her eye is already elsewhere: while Sierra Leone is her base, the landscape from which she draws her inspiration, Kai’s ambition is truly global in scope. Uniquely positioned on a fault line between worlds, she says the international community is already beginning to take note. What she’s doing, after all, “is not typical for Sierra Leone. So people are interested.”

In the meantime, Kai is in talks with the United Nations Development Programme about collaborating to start a vocational training school for tailors. While a multitude of small tailor shops litter the streets of Freetown, it is a largely unorganized industry with few opportunities for tailors to gain the sort of high-level skills Kai expects of her team. She said, “Having just gotten out of a war, there are a lot of people who need jobs and need to earn a living. Meanwhile, I need a workforce. I am here to offer people jobs.”

Kai also plans to one day open her own textile factory. Fabric, she says, is at the heart of African fashion. “If you go to Ghana, if you go to Nigeria, they’re developing their own textiles. I grew up in Ethiopia, and they have a very distinct textile, so that if you see it, you immediately know the material. So it’s about how in Sierra Leone do we create our own.”

Fabric also gets to the heart of the concept behind the name Aschobi. Kai explains: “When there’s an event, say there’s a wedding or a funeral or a birth, and you want to identify yourself with a group of people, then you say, ‘Okay, you know what, this is the material we’re going to use for that day.’ Then the group will get a piece of cloth, and they can sew whatever style they want, but when they show up at the funeral or the wedding, everyone will know they’re together because they’re all wearing the same material. This is Aschobi. It’s a play on these notions of exclusiveness and inclusiveness. Because usually the word refers to being part of an exclusive group, but I’m taking the stuff and I’m mass producing it. It’s exclusive because Aschobi is my particular brand, but at the same time, it’s inclusive because anybody can have that material.”