

# INFLUENCES OF CULTURAL ATTIRE IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION FOR POSTERITY OF AFRICAN CULTURE

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# Influences of Cultural Attire in Contemporary Fashion for Posterity of African Culture

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Clothes have been integral to us humans. Even in the pre-historic, our ancestors used to wrap their bodies either with tree leaves, barks, or animal skin. The invention of clothes had played a vital role in determining the behavior of humans. Since then, a lot has been changed, and the fabric/garment industry has undergone an unprecedented change. Now, numerous designs, patterns, and styles have come into being and people around the globe buy them depending on their sense of fashion- some may prefer stylish, cool looks while others adhere to comfort. **Problem:** Over the last few years, the demand for East African dresses has gone significantly high not only in the US but also in different parts of the world, the artists however feel that they are not supported enough not only by the government but also the lack of proper platforms for their designs to be celebrated. These designer dresses have an exceptional of celebrating tradition and culture while commemorating the heritage and beauty of the motherland. It's more than just being a fashion statement. **Objective:** The main objective of this paper is to establish how fashion designers today have managed to bring culture into wear and created contemporary designs that have brought pride to the East African communities. **Design:** This researcher has used qualitative and quantitative methods as research engines but particularly a case study of fashion designers and their works. **Setting:** This research was carried out in east Africa to further understand some of its fabrics and their translation to contemporary society. **Subjects:** the subject of this study is the traditional attire alongside fashion designers who've transitioned it to contemporary design. **Results:** The research results revealed that designers and tailors don't make these clothes simply for appearance's sake; each color, symbol, and even shape of the clothing may have a very specific meaning or purpose. African clothing can also be a symbol of creativity, status, and allegiance to African tribal roots. **Conclusion:** It is, therefore, safe to conclude that fashion is a fundamental pillar in the society that can promote the cultural heritage of a society and that designers need to create platforms for themselves and make themselves seen. The designs created should make the world stop and watch the pride that is east African heritage.

**Keywords:** fashion designer, cultural heritage, cloths, fabrics, Kitenge. Kanga, kisutu, kanzu, impu, mushanana, Kemi kalikawe, Mustafa hassanali.

## 1.0 BACKGROUND

Fashion heritage is simultaneously a physical stock of design and models and the cultural heritage of a style. It is highly valuable because designers can rethink past collections and styles and rewrite them as modern designs. In its evolution, fashion develops a dynamic of change and permanence, which makes fashion good a creative. fashion is an economy of creativity and heritage.

The attitudes to “fashion” have changed radically in the twenty-first century in the light of globalization, technological innovation, and the growth of the internet. Clothes have been increasingly approached as a means of self-expression, rather than as a signifier of status or profession (Geczy and Karaminas 2018). As a result, the identity issue in fashion is changing at different speeds in various parts of the world, depending on how much the region is connected with the global world, or instead is still anchored into its local traditions and heritage

The textile and clothing sector is a knowledge-intensive industry; producers do not just need the technical knowledge for improving production processes and logistics, but also the commercial knowledge to understand and translate consumer behavior and market trends into the design, production, and marketing processes. Suppliers in developing countries, in particular small and medium enterprises, often lack access to the inputs, services, and knowledge necessary to take their product or service to market – especially more formalized and developed export markets.

Cultural appropriation in the realm of fashion sparks passionate debate owing to the complex legal issues at stake. On the one side, the way the fashion industry operates is such that designers freely integrate elements from other cultures into their creations. Some designers even reject the concept of cultural appropriation and refer instead to “cultural appreciation,” claiming that drawing inspiration is an homage to difference and diversity. In that sense, a diversity of cultural influences is one of the engines behind a dynamic fashion industry; it is what makes fashion evolve, thrive, and constantly reinvent itself. Much of our contemporary thinking about identity is shaped by pictures that are in various ways unhelpful or just plain wrong” (Appiah 2018, p. XIII). In this respect, Appiah points out that “we are living with the legacies of ways of thinking that took their modern shape in the nineteenth century, and that it is high time to subject them to the best thinking of the twenty first” (Appiah 2018, p. XIII).

Lack of an international presence is also a big headache to upcoming east African designers. our fabric, our textiles, and our prints are showcased in the international market by Western designers(-Rehmtullah). For example, in 2007 he launched a line using the Maasai fabric. In 2009 Louis Vuitton launched a similar line for men using the Maasai fabrics and probably made thousands of dollars out of that collection.

Industry-related education is another major challenge. “East Africa is known for one of the best universities in the region, but not all of these universities offer a fashion program. If African governments were to throw their support behind the fashion industry, the possibilities would be enormous. Indeed, it will take a joint effort to get the African fashion industry up to speed.

The East African nation’s Swahili designers are overcoming the absence of developed domestic fashion industry to increasingly take their collections of clothes woven in traditional colors and flamboyant

prints to top international runways, major global boutique stores, and wardrobes across the world. Only South Africa has a higher literacy rate among Africa's 10 most populous nations, but Tanzania's formal education system has largely bypassed fashion — the country lacks even a single major design school. But a rising breed of millennial designers is substituting the absence of that formal design education with raw skill and ambition and is coupling an increasing global appetite for diverse designs with a desire to give back to the country, to carve out a success story.

## 2.0 INTRODUCTION

Clothing is part of oneself and a form of expression. Each dress tells a story linked to a culture somewhere that helps identify an origin and a society that one represents. It is not just a basic need like food and water, but not only is clothing used for warmth and protection from harsh climatic conditions but also an indication of one's beliefs and life story. Traditional dress or costume is a phrase used widely both by the general public and writers on the dress. It conjures up images of rural people dressed in colorful, layered, exotic clothing from an idealized past in some faraway place. This notion of the traditional dress has been scrutinized and found inadequate by many researchers and scholars, but its uncritical use continues into the twenty-first century. The phrase traditional dress or costume is often used interchangeably with the term's ethnic, regional, and folk dress.

There are two types of clothing. One type is more functional and is worn every day and the other type is more formal, historical, and unique to a certain culture or nation. The latter is worn on special occasions and occasions that require the expression of culture.

## 3.0 THEORY

### 3.1 Evolution of East African Clothing

Since the Palaeolithic period, animal skins have been the common material used to make clothes. Over time, methods to process their skins were developed to create leather. In East Africa, the cow was and is found in abundance so, its hides were extracted and processed to make cloaks, wrapping skirts, loincloths, belts, mats, beds, and aprons. Alternatively, the hides of goats and calves would also be used. The history of clothing in East Africa and the continent, in general, is difficult to trace back as there is very little written documentation from the past. However, some information can be gathered from art like sculptures and performing arts, traditional clothes available to the people today and, oral history passed down over generations.

In Africa, including this part of the continent, the way one dresses indicates what tribe or clan they belong to, their gender, marital and social status, and age. Every ethnic group had its way of tanning the hides. For instance, some groups in Kenya used the bark of trees, lemon, or ash for the process, while some groups in Rwanda, for example, had a more complex process that involved drying the skin, stretching it, scraping the flesh with a native tool and finally rubbing it with grease before wearing it. People skilled in making leather were highly respected and their craft

was honored.

Barkcloth was another material that was used to make clothes. When humans learned how to make tools out of stone, they invented tools to peel, pound, and soften tree bark, enough to make fabric.



Fig. 1. Ugandan Women in a bark cloth wrapper.

Initially, men and women would use belts and bark cloth to cover the lower half of their bodies. Over time, they'd use this material to cover both the upper and lower portions of their bodies.

### 3.2 Cultural Exchange

It wasn't until the 19th century that cotton became the widespread material in this region. The material was introduced by traders and colonizers and it proved to be better suited to the tropical and warm weather of East Africa.

Trade along with colonization, religious missions, and immigration acted as catalysts for cultural exchange with the Arabs, Indians, and Europeans. As such, East Africa sees a lot of these influences in their own cultures. Clothing is a good example to demonstrate these cultural influences.

### 3.3 Religion and Local Culture

Another factor that influences cultural clothing is religion. Christianity, Islam and local animist religions are the common religions practiced in this region and the level of modesty required in one's attire depends on religion. Additionally, the cultures of each tribe also impact the type of clothing worn. Every tribe has its way of dressing and, therefore, there isn't one single outfit that can be declared the national costume of any of the six countries. However, certain garments are distinct to a country.

## 4.0 STUDY METHODOLOGY

This paper qualitatively analyses information about the different traditional fabrics, how much of a cultural heritage are tied to them and how they have been incorporated into the contemporary world of fashion with a view of two Tanzanian fashion designers. The major sources of data collection are journals, articles, essays and websites, generally literature.

## 5.0 FINDINGS

### 5.1 Different fabrics have their origin and different cultural background

Cloth and dress have been described as a mirror of the culture of the people in any society (Perani and Wolff, 1999: 25). They symbolize the practices of the society, bounded by the same geographical location, sharing the same cultural values. In the cultural context, cloth serves basic needs such as clothing and shelter (Payne, 1965).

#### 5.1.1 Kitenge



Fig. 2. Ugandan Women in a bark cloth wrapper.

Kitenge is a cotton fabric that uses a variety of vibrant colors and patterns made using a version of the Indonesian batik technique with a reason behind it.

The Dutch had been trading in Indonesia since the 16th century before eventually colonizing the archipelago in the 19th century. Dutch merchants learned about batik and, they took back some samples of batik textiles to the Netherlands where textile producers found ways to produce batik in bulk and at a lower cost. These inferior batiks were introduced to Indonesia but, they didn't sell well there

however, well-received in their trading ports in West Africa in the 19th century and spread to other African countries becoming popular in Eastern Africa as well.

Kitenge that are of better quality and that have more elegant patterns are presented as gifts and are even part of local wedding festivities.

The color combinations and patterns have made the kitenge a symbol of Africa. Wrapping clothes similar to the kitenge are prominent in this region. Today they're all made of cotton as it helps the wearer keep cool in the heat and warm when the temperatures drop slightly.

## 5.2 Tanzania

In Tanzania, the Swahili culture is prominent. The Swahili people live on the Swahili coast, referring to the coastal area of Eastern and Southeastern Africa that border the Indian Ocean. Today, Swahili is one of the official languages in Tanzania, showing the extent of the culture in the country. The Swahili people have a rich and multi-cultural heritage due to their interactions with Arabs, Indians, Indonesians, and Europeans in the region influences that can be seen in their traditional dress and their way of dressing.

Tanzania is also home to over 120 tribes who have their own cultural identity and thus their way



Fig. 3. Kanzu with a suit jacket.

of dressing. But what links them is their traditional garments that are worn more frequently than others hence recognized as traditional Tanzanian attire.

### 5.2.1 Kanzu

The Kanzu is traditionally worn by Muslim Swahili today, but it is the national costume of Tanzania, and other cultures have also adopted it in the country.

A Kanzu is a floor-length white robe with full sleeves, similar to the Middle Eastern thobe. It is worn with

either a western-style suit jacket or a loose-fitted long-sleeved cloak known as a Bisht. An embroidered cylindrical hat with a flat top called a kofia completes the outfit. This hat has hundreds of tiny holes made to allow airflow.

Kanzu was inspired by the clothes introduced to Tanzania by Arab merchants and Omani missionaries. That would explain the similarities between the kofia and the Omani kumma hat. Kanzu is only worn on a prayer day, which is every Friday and on religious and special occasions. Daily clothing consists of trousers and shirts.

### 5.2.2 *Khanga*

Women, on the other hand, wear kanga, a rectangular piece of fabric that is made of pure cotton. The difference between kanga and a kitenge is that the material of a kitenge is thicker and of superior quality.

The word kanga translates to guinea fowl in Swahili and it is named that way because the patterns on the fabric resemble the specks on the feathers of the local bird. The designs often represent the Tanzanian landscape, flora, fauna, and cultural symbols. Designs can even have political logos and



Fig. 4. A khanga fabric with a Swahili message

messages which are worn in support of a certain political party during their election campaign. There is even special kanga for weddings, which is called kisutu and comes in white, black, and red.

In the rectangular cloth, there is a thick frame-like colorful border with designs and the middle is often of a contrasting color with more motifs. Just above the bottom border, there is a message written in Swahili.

#### 5.2.2.1 *Khanga history*

Kangas were developed in the mid-19th century when Muslim women on the Swahili coast purchased printed bandanas that were introduced to the area by Portuguese merchants. These printed bandanas used an Indian hand-block-printing technique to print the designs. The women then stitched six of the bandanas together and made a fabric that could be used to cover themselves modestly.

#### 5.2.2.2 *Importance of khanga message*

Kanga is used as a medium of communication that expresses social values and identity (Beck



2001, 2005; Biersteker and Amory 2017). This is why kanga still exists from the 19th century without any contaminations in shape and use (Linnebuhr 1997: 139). It is the result of intercultural exchange between various world traditions that involve several agents and textile productions. During the 19th century, the textile industry in Tanganyika produced different kinds of fabrics and clothes that inspired the creation and use of the kanga. The first predecessor of kanga was the so-called kitambi.

The messages, or Jina, weren't initially a part of kangas. They were only added at the beginning of the 20th century. The messages use proverbs, poetry, or a moral from a story in the Swahili language to convey many types of messages. could be advice for people to learn good habits and good family values or a positive message to themselves, which is most applicable to girls' reaching womanhood or young women; in that case, the messages serve as teachings and warnings about possible situations in life. Some messages act as secret romantic messages intended for their husbands. Or, they could be a subtle insult intended for a specific person or, viewers in general. Women oftentimes aren't able to verbally express themselves due to societal norms, but they feel like they can truly speak their minds through the messages on their kangas.



Fig. 5. Women wearing kanga

Kangas are a part of every Swahili person from their birth to their death, which is why they hold more meaning to women in Tanzania. they are purchased in a set of two for different purposes of events.

### 5.3 Kenya

Kenya is home to 42 tribes and each of them has its way of dressing. However, there are some common elements in their outfits. They all have either a loincloth or a wrapping skirt, a cloak covering the shoulders, and a headdress.

#### 5.3.1 Shuka

The Maasai dress comprises three pieces of cotton Shuka. Two Shuka's are tied at the shoulder, each covering the body and the third is wrapped around the shoulder, like a shawl. Or it is placed on the shoulders from the back, like a cloak. The Shuka most commonly comes in red as it is the primary color of the Maasai. Red is the symbol of earth, freedom, bravery, and blood, provided by nature. Shukas may also come in blue and green. Blue represents the sky where heaven and God are and green symbolizes fertility, earth, and fortune. More recently, multi-colored shukas have also emerged. Shukas may be of

solid color or have patterns such as stripes and checkers.

Accompanying the shuka are several beaded pieces of jewelry that is worn to enhance the aesthetic appeal and to indicate their age. For example, young unmarried women wear flat disc-shaped jewelry around their necks, brides wear long heavy necklaces that extend to their knees, and married women wear long leather earrings. The beads come in different colors and each is an indicator of a clan.

Headdresses are also common in Maasai attire. Women occasionally wear beautiful beaded headdresses. While men wear headdresses as a sign of achievement. A circular headdress made of ostrich feathers indicates that the man fought a lion but didn't kill it. A headdress made of a lion's mane indicates that the man fought and killed a lion. These headdresses are worn as a symbol of their courage.

Ethnic groups like the Maasai have been able to preserve their way of dressing but, most people in Kenya have adopted western-styled clothes as their everyday attire in this era.



Fig. 6. Maasai in shuka.



Fig. 7. A Maasai man wearing a headdress made of ostrich feathers.

## 5.4 Rwanda

### 5.4.1 Mushanana

Mushanana or Umushanana is a sash draped over one shoulder, worn over a tank top or bustier with a wrapped skirt bunched at the hips. Mushanana is made from silk, a gauzy and lightweight fabric to create a flowing effect, and polished cotton. Mushanana was formerly worn by older women daily but has now become a staple attire for formal occasions such as weddings, funerals, and church services. The dress is also the standard costume for female dancers in the country's national dance troupes.



Fig. 8. Rwandan mushanana

It is as old as the Rwandan culture. It has always been a part of the Rwandan culture even long before the colonialists came. Except, in pre-colonial times, *“the attire was designed in two pieces and made out of animal skins locally known as impu”*.

When colonialists came, different materials were introduced into the market, and bans were put on using animal skin for clothing. As such, the fabric of Mushanana was changed to silk and polished cotton but wonderfully, its design never changed.

Today, Mushanana is making a strong comeback on the continent, especially in Rwanda, and this time, with the young. According to sources, many young women are wearing the dress more often than not, saying that it is an important outfit because it represents the culture of their country.

Nowadays, much of the urban population in these countries have adopted western-styled clothes as their everyday attire. But even these contemporary clothes always have a touch of tradition in them, keeping the wearer connected to their culture. This is being achieved by the efforts and creativity of local designers who are creating fusion dresses that are more functional in the urban lifestyle but also express cultural identity. This is done by styling the dress in a way that maintains the required amount of modesty and through the use of typical motifs and colors.

## 5.5 Exemplars in East Africa

The work of East African fashion designers provides rich insights into how artists engage with tradition, an amorphous yet powerful concept. Designers from Africa must navigate the associations borne by textiles, motifs, and garments that are broadly associated with longstanding, local cultures – emblems of tradition. Some designers express their connection to tradition directly, in clear stylistic allusions, while others embed allusions to this cultural category deep within the design process, invisible without interpretation.

### 5.5.1 Kemi Kalikawe



Fig. 9. Kemi Kalikawe

Kemi Kalikawe worked with the British Council; her job was to find underground fashion talent: that is how she ended up making her first own dresses. She grew up in Botswana, but her business is in the thumping heart of Dar es Salaam. Kemi Kalikawe gave her lifestyle store a name, Naledi means “star” in her Botswana Native language. Her brand is Africa revamped, where a continent getting a modern twist, bringing the West and Africa together.

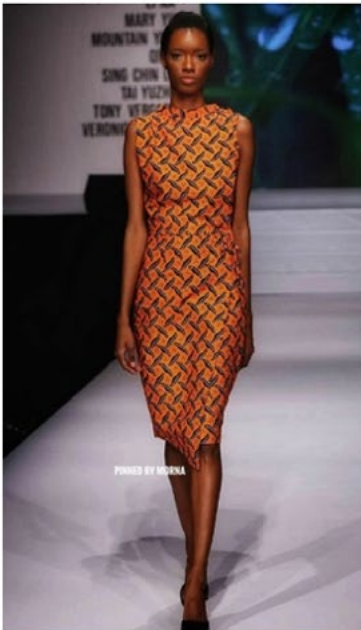
Her background is reflected in her store, where she promotes other creatives, alongside her products. Kemi Kalikawe make dresses, mostly for women, which have all, got an influence of African fabrics. Some of her garments even use Tanzanian fabrics (like the Khanga). On her shelves, clients who visit her store find jewelry, sandals, and vibrantly colored outfits.

As a child, Kemi Kalikawe dreamed of working in the design industry, but she ended up studying marketing. Her gift was her imagination that brought to life every fabric she came across. With a variety of designs, fabrics, and patterns on display, you can discover that her work is a real passion. Like her, many African women are discovering their talented skills.

During Origin Africa 2019, some self-confident designers raised their voices requiring more attention and appreciation for their roles. Tanzanian fashion designer and entrepreneur Kemi Kalikawe (brand name Naledi) said: “Designers are mostly forgotten when experts discuss the cotton-to-apparel value chain. But at the end of the day, we are the ones who create the most value. I went to India and saw there those designers can work with factories and that factories want to work with designers. At

the same time, I learned that East African designers hardly have any training working with factories and brands. We need to learn how to make patterns and to use CAD equipment. Unfortunately, here in Tanzania, we don't even have fashion schools.”

*5.5.1.1 Below are Kemi Kalikawe's designs*





### 5.5.2 Mustafa Hassanali

Pan African Designer Mustafa Hassanali, a celebrated name in Tanzania pursues fashion as a religion. His personable and affable demeanor in parallel with his bohemian work of art has made him amidst the premier and popular designers in Tanzania and beyond.



Fig. 10. Mustafa Hassanali

No wonder then he sports an A-list clientele including the crème de la crème of the society. Considered a fashion guru, his designs reflect the deeply embedded cultural heritage of Tanzanian society along with the avant-garde, Couture, and contemporary styles.

A medical Doctor by Profession, Fashion designing began as A Hobby in 1999, whereby one of his

first creations was worn by Hoyce Temu who was crowned Miss Tanzania 1999 wearing his signature evening Gown Thus Begun the Roller coaster ride that eventually led to the growth and creation of Tanzania Fashion Industry which can be duly accredited to the zeal and zest of Mustafa Hassanali.

Hassanali's zest for fashion is not only limited to fostering his creations and offering something new to his target audience, but he also believed in the enhancement of the Tanzanian Fashion Industry on the whole. As late American President John F Kennedy stated "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" Mustafa has showcased in 31 cities across 21 Countries globally representing as Tanzania Fashion and Cultural ambassador. Apart from designing for corporate and television-based shows and events amongst others, Mustafa's work has been highly appreciated at the international level. He has worked alongside Naomi Campbell's who has modeled for him to various celebrities and high-profile leaders who have adorned his couture.

Mustafa Hassanali was also appointed by the Minister for information, youth, Culture, and sports to be part of the steering committee to search for Tanzania National Attire. He also has been the only designer to have been invited by the Tanzania Embassy in Sweden and Russia to celebrate Tanzania Mainland and the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar's 50th anniversary in 2011 and 2014 respectively. What adds a unique dimension to Hassanali's persona is his constant initiative in going out of the way, in supporting various charities such as "Breast Cancer Awareness" & "Violence against Women". In Zanzibar, he has supported the Zanzibar Mental Hospital. No wonder his medical background has resulted in the establishment of the brand "Fashion 4 Health".

Since the commencement of this fashionable sojourn, whereby various women have made Hassanali part of their life whilst choosing him to design their wedding and statement evening gowns, He truly has been touched and mentored by many of such women over the past years, thus the adage, "behind every successful man there is a woman" has been made a reality.

Mustafa was named as one of Africa's Top Ten Male designers by the UK's NEW AFRICAN WOMEN and Kenya Airways MSAFIRI magazine named him COUNT OF COUTURE. He is the only designer from East Africa to be featured on Forbes Africa.

He launched Swahili Fashion Week in 2008, which has created a promising platform not only for established designers and models but for aspiring entrants of this avenue and has now become the largest fashion event in east & central africa.

*5.5.2.1 Below are some images of Mustafa Hassanali's designs*



## 6.0 CONCLUSION

The Tanzanian fashion designer Jamillavera Swai -It's true that we, African designers, don't have to pay for inspiration. Just living in colorful Africa inspires us. It's nevertheless frustrating that all those prosperous international brands that greatly benefit from us by sucking inspiration from our creations and shows, give nothing in return. Our creations are not respected or rewarded as intellectual property. Embedding culture into the design is what sells our heritage out in the world. But lack of a voice and support from the government and native origins is what kills the spirit of design. nevertheless every creative should think outside the box or do away with the box, and find a way to sell what they create.



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