

# THE IMPACT OF SAUTI SOL IN THE GLOBALIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY EAST AFRICAN CULTURE

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# The Impact of Sauti Sol in the Globalization of Contemporary East African Culture

## ABSTRACT

**Problem:** East African culture has been enjoyed in the region. However, on the international stage, it plays second fiddle to West and South African culture. This is true of food, music and fashion. **Objectives:** Sauti Sol have found ways to remain relevant in the East African cultural scene for over a decade. Using their fame, they are able to promote contemporary East African fashion to a global audience. The objective of this paper was to study their innovative practices and discover what makes them globally appealing. **Subject:** The study was based on the all male band, Sauti Sol. They are performing artistes based in Nairobi. **Conclusion:** The study concluded that Sauti Sol have contributed to the exportation of contemporary East African fashion. The group has done this by leveraging their fame. Aside from having a relevant narrative, they have engaged in innovative practices that have put them on the map. These include using varied languages that have a mass appeal, collaborating with global artistes, performing in venues around the world, leveraging social media platforms and making bold fashion statements.

**Keywords:** fashion, artiste, music

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Africa is home to hundreds of tribes and languages. Kenya alone has 44 tribes. Each group has its own distinct fashion practices influenced by climate and lifestyle. Clothing is used as an expression of identity, social class and occupation (Gott et al, 2010). The countries that make up East Africa are Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan.

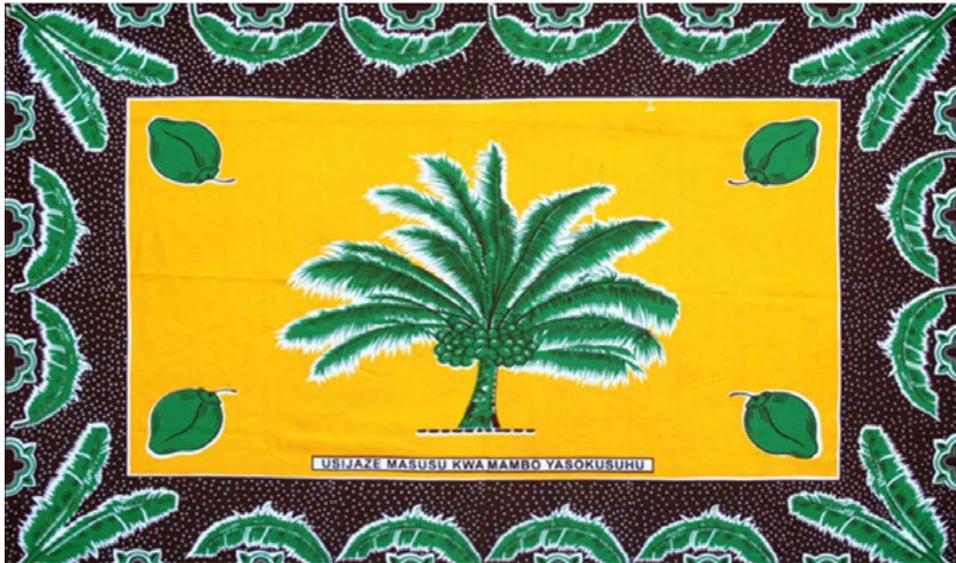


Fig 1. A typical kitenge fabric



Fig. 2. Kikoy fabric



Fig.3. Leso/ Khanga

Contemporary fashion simply refers to the fashion practices of current times. Contemporary East African fashion is characterized by use of kitenge, kikoi, leso/khanga, and shuka.

These are the local Kenyan names for the fabrics. Depending on the part of the region, these fabrics have different names.

Urbanization in East Africa has led to mixing of cultures. The cities are a melting pot of many groups of ethnicities. This, combined with access to a wide range of materials and skills, has led to the development of contemporary fashion. The clothing style in cities is also adapted to the economic activities taking place. The population tends to have a category of clothing for work and another for attending occasions known as “Sunday best”.

### **1.1 Sauti Sol**

Sauti Sol is an East African music group of Kenyan descent. It was originally started by a trio consisting of Willis Chimano, Bien-Aimé Baraza and Savara Mudigi. They were later joined by instrumentalist Polycarp “fancy fingers” Otieno. Their debut album “Mwanzo” premiered in 2008 (Odidi, 2020). Since then they have enjoyed a lucrative career both locally and internationally, rising to be East Africa’s top streamed artistes on music streaming platforms.

By highlighting Sauti Sol’s various works, it is possible to outline which practices have allowed the band to stay relevant enough to continue to influence East African fashion.

### **1.2 Social Issues**

The band often uses their music to address social issues, especially those affecting the youth. The 2020 single “Insecure” addresses body image issues brought on by consumption of social media that plagues today’s youth. Mental health is not a commonly discussed topic in East Africa.

The band also put a spotlight on the issue of colorism through their 2019 single “Melanin”. The discussion around different shades of African skin stirs up controversy. By choosing to highlight taboo subjects, the band has gained a loyal following.

### **1.3 Collaboration**

The band has collaborated with a variety of artistes in East Africa and globally. In 2016, Sauti Sol and Yemi Alade debuted the single “Africa” to international acclaim. The band and American award-winning musician India Arie produced the single “My Everything” in 2020.

The music videos for their collaboration singles featured contemporary East African fashion. Collaboration with global artistes puts East African fashion in view of these artistes international audiences.

### **Adaptation**

The pandemic changed the nature of the music industry. Worldwide directives were issued for all people to stay indoors. Public gatherings were banned. This heavily impacted the income streams of artistes in the music industry.

Sauti Sol adapted by introducing virtual concerts. They aired their virtual concerts on online platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Africa Month Celebration, A “Working From Home” Concert and Midnight Train Album Virtual Experience are three examples of virtual concerts the group has staged in the last two years.

The boy band made an entry into traditional TV with the airing of their reality show on Maisha Magic Plus channel. The 13 part series depicts the background and history of each group member. It also captures behind the scenes of their music productions. This move humanizes Sauti Sol by making them relatable. It has served to increase their influence.

## 2.0 CONCLUSION

Longevity on the East African art scene is not something many musicians manage to achieve. Through collaboration and innovation Sauti Sol have managed to remain relevant. Based on their current momentum, they will not be slowing down any time soon. Because of their popularity, their performance outfits are viewed across the world.

Sauti Sol has impacted East African culture and made a lasting impression in both the music and fashion industry. By addressing prevalent issues including colorism, self love, politics, etc. they have taught a whole generation of East Africans that their culture is not inferior.

Sauti Sol's outfits from their Coke Studio performance with West African musician Yemi Alade were exhibited in Brighton Museum & Art Gallery in 2016. This was an iconic moment for homegrown design. (Muchene, 2016) The band successfully brought the African fashion narrative to a world stage. For the longest time, Africa has been used as a dumping ground for the used clothes of the Western world (Gott, et al). By globalizing contemporary East African fashion, Sauti Sol has given the region a voice and an opportunity to compete with international fashion.

Urban Kenyans take massive pride in their appearance. A common remark from tourists visiting Nairobi's CBD is how well dressed everyone is. To Kenyans, fashion knows no weather meaning comfort is a small sacrifice to make for style (Gott et al, 2010).

Seeing Sauti Sol embrace their heritage has encouraged many East African youth to do the same.



Fig 1. A typical kitenge fabric

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