

Simone Cipriani, “Innovation in African Textiles: a Move Away from Ethnic Characterisations”, in «Africa e Mediterraneo», vol. 25, n. 85, 2016, pp. 50-53

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DOI: 10.53249/aem.2016.85.10

<http://www.africaemediterraneo.it/en/journal/>



# Africa e Mediterraneo

C U L T U R A E S O C I E T À

## n. 85 | Moda e sviluppo in Africa

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Agency, interazione, identità:  
il vestire in Africa

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Unconventional  
Entrepreneurs:  
the Youth in the Ghanaian  
Fashion Industry

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Quand la mode sauve le  
textile: l'engagement des  
créateurs africains

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La moda africana in Europa  
parla un'altra lingua:  
il caso del *kanga*



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**Africa e Mediterraneo**

Semestrale di Lai-momo cooperativa sociale  
Registrazione al Tribunale di Bologna n. 6448  
del 6/6/1995

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Edizioni Lai-momo  
Via Gamberi 4, 40037 Sasso Marconi - Bologna  
www.laimomo.it

**Finito di stampare**

il 31 gennaio 2017 presso  
LITOSEIBO SRL  
Rastignano - Bologna

La direzione non si assume alcuna responsabilità  
per quanto espresso dagli autori nei loro  
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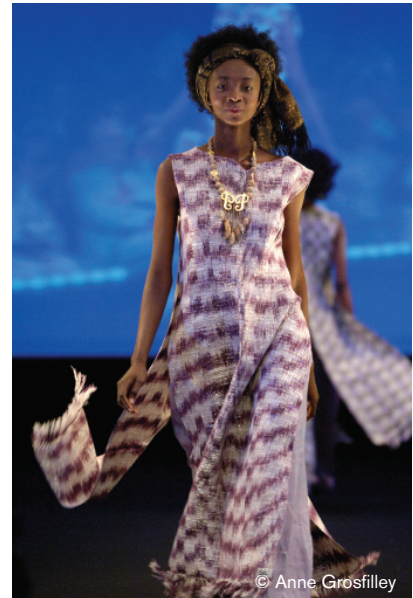
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# Innovation in African Textiles: a Move Away from Ethnic Characterisations

Textile tradition in Africa, as often considered by scholars and specialists, is a richness that risks being crystallized into static shapes, but this great heritage could be a vehicle of change and development for people.

by Simone Cipriani

**I** am never at ease in conversations on African fabric with people from the aid world and with scholars of cultural disciplines related to African arts and crafts. As a matter of fact, I think that sometimes historians, sociologists, development experts that usually write on this matter tend to focus on African fabric only in relation to the past. I have read a lot of essays on the role of fabric in traditional cultures and in shaping identities all over the continent (with a particular focus on West Africa, of course). They are beautiful and enriching, as all analyses based on a historical perspective can be. But some of them convey the image of something crystallized in shapes and practices that don't evolve.

My work (at the Ethical Fashion Initiative [\[ioninitiative.org\]\(http://ethicalfashioninitiative.org\)\) takes me towards another direction: what to do with African textile traditions, in the world of today, when it comes to trade and to using them as a vehicle of income generation for people who live at the margins of their societies. From this point of view, fabric and weaving traditions are a starting point: if knowing the roots of these traditions - or rather culture - is important to whoever works in this area, the main issue is how to allow the textile value chain to become part of a wider vision, capable of supporting a process of change and empowerment for people. I would like to develop my take on this vision from three different perspectives that demonstrate how weaving and textile heritage can be both an obstacle and a tool for development, depending on how we look at them. They are about: gender, market and creativity.](http://ethicalfash-</a></p>
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## THE ETHICAL FASHION INITIATIVE

by EFI Staff

**T**he Ethical Fashion Initiative is a flagship programme of the International Trade Centre, a joint agency of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. The Initiative works to reduce global poverty by involving micro-entrepreneurs in the developing world with international and regional trade. The Ethical Fashion Initiative links the world's top fashion talents to marginalised artisans - the majority of them women - in East and West Africa, Haiti and the West Bank. Active since 2009, the Initiative enables arti-



Christie Brown showcases her designs at Altaroma's Room Service event with the support of the Ethical Fashion Initiative.  
© Gianni Catani, Ariel Gabriel La Rosa e Luca Sorrentino

sans living in urban and rural poverty to connect with the global fashion chain. Facilitating this connection for the mutual benefit of artisans and designers, the Ethical Fashion Initiative advocates the importance of dignified work and a living wage. In everything it does, the Ethical Fashion Initiative develops local creativity, fosters predominantly female employment and empowerment, promotes gender equality to reduce extreme poverty and increase the export capacities of the regions in which it operates. It also satisfies the fashion world's wish to be more fair.

The Ethical Fashion Initiative is proud

of its long-term partnerships around the world including Vivienne Westwood, Stella McCartney, United Arrows, sass & bide, Karen Walker, Osklen, Chan Luu, and Mimco.

The Ethical Fashion Initiative also enables Africa's rising generation of fashion talent to forge sustainable and fulfilling creative collaborations with local artisans and access internationally renowned fashion platforms. Working with the Ethical Fashion Initiative, brands such as MaXhosa by Laduma, Anita Quansah, Dent de Man, Orange Culture, Sindiso Khumalo, Sophie Zinga and Studio 189 have been given the opportunity to

raise awareness about their work and develop business links within the fashion industry while also develop products through the Ethical Fashion Initiative's network of artisans.

Since 2016, the Ethical Fashion Initiative has expanded its area of work in collaboration with Lai-momo, to develop vocational training centres for asylum-seekers in Italy. In July 2016, the first training centre opened, and teaches 18 asylum seekers skills in leather bag making.

Under its slogan, "NOT CHARITY, JUST WORK." the Ethical Fashion Initiative advocates a fairer global fashion industry.

## L'innovazione nel tessile africano per il superamento della caratterizzazione etnica

L'immagine comune dell'industria tessile e della moda africana proposta da storici, sociologi e operatori dello sviluppo è a volte cristallizzata in una rappresentazione di forme e pratiche non soggette a evoluzione.

Il patrimonio della produzione di tessuti in Africa può infatti essere tanto uno strumento quanto un ostacolo allo sviluppo, in base all'approccio con cui lo si prende in considerazione: possiamo dimostrarlo considerando tre diverse prospettive legate al genere, al mercato, alla creatività.

In passato la tessitura, in quanto pratica che riproduce le strutture e le gerarchie sociali, era spesso un'attività legata al mondo maschile, a causa della postura del corpo dovuta agli strumenti utilizzati. Grazie all'introduzione, negli anni '80 in Burkina Faso, di nuovi e più accessibili telai, essa si è evoluta e rinnovata, diventando un mezzo di sviluppo ed emancipazione femminile.

Per quanto riguarda il tema del mercato, bisogna chiedersi per quale motivo si siano riprodotti per decenni i medesimi stili nei tessuti africani, rinchiudendoli in una sorta di ghetto senza possibilità di crescita, con conseguenze negative dal punto di vista commerciale. La risposta è che non si è lavorato allo sviluppo dei prodotti. Eppure, la creatività fiorisce nelle società contemporanee africane, dai festival di cinema e teatro alle gallerie d'arte, con una capacità d'innovazione che potrebbe essere applicata con successo alle tradizioni e alle competenze del settore tessile.

Ethical Fashion Initiative, programma dell'International Trade Centre delle Nazioni Unite, promuove azioni che permettono agli artigiani di essere parte di una catena produttiva internazionale, secondo una prospettiva complessa che, da un lato, consideri e valorizzi la ricca eredità delle forme tradizionali e, dall'altro, permetta alla moda di svilupparsi e fare emergere il suo potenziale socio-economico.

### Gender

We can consider weaving as one of the endowments of African societies and, as such, a factor that also reproduces social structures and hierarchies. Weaving is often a tradition linked only to men. Women, because of the physical posture of the body in old weaving systems, could not access it. But this is something that is not cast in bronze. In Burkina Faso, the administration of Thomas Sankara, focused on social development and gender equality and introduced new weaving tools (the vertical loom) that “liberated” women, by allowing them to weave and to have a stake in an income generating activity previously reserved only to men. It happened in the 80's: a traditional tool of male dominance was changed into a vehicle of female empowerment. This was due to vision (Sankara had a lot of it) and a way of approaching cultural endowments from a perspective of social change. Sankara didn't simply preserve a tradition: he allowed it to flourish in a new way.

### Market

As a commercial product, African fabric is beautiful and has always been used in fashion collections (since the days of Yves Saint Laurent, and do we want to remember the collections of Romeo Gigli, in the 80's?). But the question is: why do we still see the same patterns and styles repeated for decades? Answer: no product development. Keeping something linked to tradition equals keeping it into a separate ghetto, to be admired, cherished, studied, but not allowed to change and thus to grow. If Italy (to make an example of a country with weaving traditions) had not distanced itself from tradition, by innovating in product design and in processing technology, we would not have the Italian fashion industry today. Yes, the roots of Renaissance and of classic weaving are still visible in Italian fabrics, but they belong to the past; they have been used as a foundation for something bigger and different. I always think of Emilio Pucci: his colour innovation was rooted in an ancient history (his family was already powerful at the time of the Medici), but he distanced himself from it, by launching patterns and color compositions that were contemporary and appealed to a whole world of sophisticated consumers. In Florence, his birth place, there is a foundation that preserves a precious skill in silk weaving (Fondazione Lisio). This is something unique and beautiful, but it did not stop the local textile industry from evolving. When it comes to Africa, this does not apply. Historians and development experts seem to be stuck in the past and cannot conceive anything but ethnic (traditional) fabric: a recipe for disaster, commercially speaking. The classification of African textiles as ethnic is a textbook error on how too much focus on tradition can prevent development and innovation.

### Creativity

There is plenty of creative thinking and doing in Africa. Contemporary African societies have rich visual and performing arts scenes. A few weeks ago I was in Ouagadougou at a street theatre festival: *Les Récréâtrales* (<http://www.recreatrales.org/en/>). I have rarely witnessed such cultural richness: a whole quarter of Ouagadougou was closed to traffic and transformed into a place for art installations and



Akoma Production at AFEPO in Burkina Faso. © ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative & Anne Mimault

theatrical plays (that were staged in the courtyards of private houses along the main road.) Directors, actors, artists from the region and beyond were all there. This is just an example: just check the movie festivals in the region, not to mention the new galleries of contemporary art that are popping up everywhere. Western Africa is rich in creativity, which can be applied to weaving skills and traditions. At *Les Récréâtrales*, the handwoven fabrics of the Ethical Fashion Initiative were used to decorate the whole setting and to produce installations. Perhaps not by chance, Aboubakar Fofana, the greatest of all Western African indigo dyeing masters, was invited by Documenta14 (<http://www.documenta14.de/en/>) (the main appointment for contemporary art lovers) to create two installations in Kassel and Athens. Fofana works with fabric and indigo and has long collaborated with top fashion brands. His looks are contemporary and sleek: he has revitalised a tradition, by looking at the world of today.

At the Ethical Fashion Initiative we support this approach and we have enabled many communities of weavers to be part of an international supply chain: contemporary Bogolan from Mali and Danfani from Burkina Faso, with new colors and patterns, have become part of fashion collections that are sold world-wide. We also have the case of a

customer (a large Japanese distributor and brand: United Arrows) that has created a specific brand (TÉGÊ) using fabric produced in West Africa through the Ethical Fashion Initiative to make beautifully tailored suits for men.

Together, the three points above convey a message: a call to refrain referring to African fabric simply as an ethnic product. It has a beautiful heritage that is evolving towards becoming a fashion supplier for the world of today. Keep going to Africa to buy handicrafts, keep on studying heritage. But let fashion and creativity unfold their socio-economic potential for African weavers and artists. A key step forward is to integrate market and product knowledge into development and business opportunities on the continent.

### Simone Cipriani

is the founder and director of the Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI), a programme of the International Trade Centre, a joint agency of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization.