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Unconventional
Entrepreneurs:
the Youth in the Ghanaian
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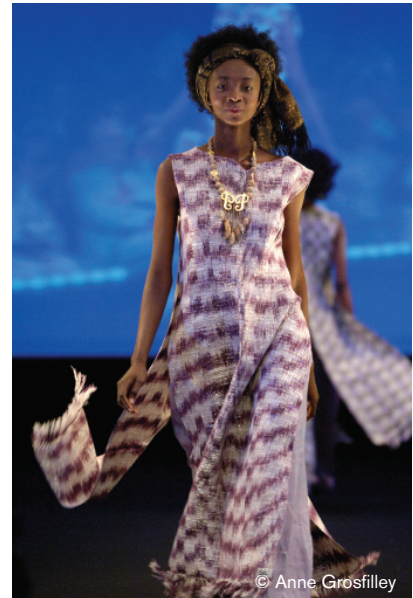
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Second-Hand Clothing the Cutting Edge of the New Fashion in Maputo

Used clothing exchanges brought new dynamics to the global clothing market, triggering a powerful web of communication processes as well as an expressive dialogue, thereby mapping trade geographies between developed and developing countries.

In the Maputo context, the “cast-off of the West” becomes a creative tool for emergent designers and new African generation’s self-styling in the field of Mozambican Fashion and street-wear in particular.

by Sofia Vilarinho

While in Western urban cultural milieus, Second Hand Clothing (SHC) consumption might be otherwise associated with fashionable cults for any other vintage, retro, fashion, political and ethical attitude portrayed in one’s style, in African countries it has become one of the most significant items in the global textile trade for communicating “modern” identities. This means that not only has the wearer become wealthier and thus able to purchase “foreign” clothing to express their outward appearance, but also that he/she has the freedom to brisk “authenticity” while showing “self-making” styles.

What is more, Western used clothing acquire “new” formats, functions and cultural meanings in Africa, depending on the way in which the garments are culturally embodied. But SHC is also about business. Used clothes are mostly «collected by charity organizations and transformed into business» (Hütz-Adams 1997). A business that encompasses specific steps as: a sort of free donations, shrink-wrapped, tie up, to bale, and sell to used-clothing sellers overseas.

The ambiguous character of SHC will be at the core of the article, with which we intend to open a debate on the way SHC can encourage various perspectives on current local informal business, fashion creation and social dress practices in Maputo associated with the construction of identity.

With these purposes in mind we seek to answer the following questions:

- a) Does SHC contribute to alternative practices of fashion and consumption in Maputo?
- b) Are those “alternative” consumption practices redefining people’s identities and in what way?

The paper is structured as follows. The first section gives an empirical sketch about wearing SHC and discusses the val-

ue of a unique used garment for the articulation of identity. Section 2 gives a brief overview about the informality and organic display around SHC business. Section 3 presents SHC as motivator for *fashion-able* practices in Maputo, the capital, where case studies on second-hand wearers and makers were carried out.

In general, the results of this article provide an insight into how SHC is culturally absorbed in the specific contexts of Maputo. It also contributes to discussions on the way SHC became the medium used to work on identities, authenticity, and sustainability. By presenting real case studies, the article shows how “alternative” consumption practices and the economic reality of a country may contribute to a holistic understanding of this market.

Methodology and Methods

Methodologically, together with a literature review, mainly qualitative research methods were applied. In terms of the literature review personal blogs and social networks were also key to collecting data and developing theories. Because scientific research referring specifically to SHC consumption in an urban environment could hardly be found, it was decided that empirical field studies in Maputo would be conducted. Knowing that exploring current creative practices can be done by means of non-interventionist methods to collect data regarding the actual situation of the SHC - in what concerns its business roots, fashion (market research) and use (consumption) in Maputo urban context - our choice is based on bibliographic research, direct observation (observational studies including photography and video recording in the field were mainly done in the urban center of Maputo, which I later cross-referred with my reports and field notes, settling hereupon my entire project), analysis of the object of study contextualizing it according to a historical, cultural,

political and economic frame of thought and semi-structured interviews (*i.e.* a personal guideline was laid out in advance), yet also combined with unstructured, open, qualitative interviews. Contributions of thirty participants who wear or do business with second-hand clothing were part of this research. Yet, *coolhunting* research approach was mainly used for explaining (after Pedroni 2010, p. 1) «not only the fashion system but also many cultural processes of production and consumption of material goods rich in immaterial contents.» The *daily immersion* combined with the research techniques along with the analysis of the SHC business (as well as other sartorial) allowed us to elaborate a “situated” reflection based on the local context of SHC consumption. This part of the research also concerned gathering information about youth consumer behavior, local clothing production done by tailors and local fashion designers, as well as the way SHC was actually used in daily life, aware of the expressive trends emerging from the *street* that often combine the usage of the traditional cloths (*capulanas*) with SHC.

The fashion face of *Xi-calamity*

With our fieldwork in Maputo and further readings on the subject of SHC,¹ we realise along with Palmer and Clark (2005, p. 4) that in fact, «second-hand clothing has become the raw material of new fashion». Locally, SHC trade is called *xi-calamidade* (as in calamity).

We observed that there are many examples of Western used clothing being adapted in lots of creative ways and that, as



Image 2. Second-hand itinerant trader. © Sofia Vilarinho



Image 1. Bails of second-hand clothing on the streets. © Sofia Vilarinho

pointed out by Palmer and Clark (2005, p. 116) it is quite common to notice that used clothes become the «new garment». What's more, because SHC comes in many different sizes, these clothes usually need several adjustment jobs to better fit their new wearer, giving local tailors an important role both professionally and socially since thanks to their expertise they help to redefine redefining and develop a certain African style,² while conserving the need for SHC imports and demand. The younger generations of habitués customers have now established a close relationship with tailors.³ Caring about their appearance from an early age, they have made tailors alter, redefine, or put aside, most of the “traditional” Mozambican attire, while working and re-styling *xi-calamidade*, making the old costumes look apparently obsolete among the youngsters. Bound to the new more cosmopolitan *branding* trends, styles and looks brought from the West, particularly in the form of SHC, this *fashionist* youth bears very little resemblance to the traditional Mozambican sartorial their parents used in the past. Lately, freer to mix clothing from almost everywhere in the world with the traditional ones, they have created a mixture of cultures through their stylish appearance.

SHC represents hereupon a piece of material cultural expression that allows the articulation of participative beliefs, dreams and meanings of personal narratives sartorially brought to life by those new African fashionistas. SHC represents an alternative practice to the current fashions cycles. Always attentive to a pristine look, SHC wearers are constant-



Image 3. Tailors working at Xipamanine-s market. Records from fieldwork, Maputo, May 2011. © Sofia Vilarinho

ing business in SHC, the strongest protagonists of this trade are the *Mamãs grandes* or *Mamanas* (Big Mammás). They are the privileged clients of the *armazéns* (warehouses) who purchase large numbers of bales (50-100).⁴ These women are so important that they control a social pyramid of different economic players such as the small-scale traders - seen at the open-air markets that line the streets, or at informal markets downtown Maputo - and the itinerant traders (as shown in Image 1 and 2). SHC can be found not only on the streets or at markets, but also at the tailors' shops (see Image 3). At the markets, where some small-scale vendors may only sell one kind of item directly from the bales, there are other vendors who, being able to afford more bales or mixed categories of bales, may sell different kinds of items. Quite often the quality and condition of the used clothing cannot be checked out beforehand; «only when the bale is opened, is it possible to know about the profitability of the cloths it contains, it is like playing the lottery» complains one of the street sellers we interviewed.

Buying a bale is either a question of luck or the chance of having good connections. As confirmed by Brooks (2013, p. 11) in his fieldwork notes: «a trader can be lucky and get many items in good condition - meaning of the right size (high use value) and that are locally perceived to be stylish (high symbolic value) - or they may be unfortunate and open a bale to find items that are ripped or rotten, too large or unfashionable». Or, as Hansen points out, sometimes it is necessary «to build good relations or to pay extra tax to the warehouse

ly searching for those exclusive styles: «I want to dress nicely. When shopping from *xi-calמידade* I can guarantee exclusivity. I'm sure I will not find a girl dressed like me», a female teenager who was buying used clothing at *Janete's* market (in Maputo, 2011) tells us. Henceforward, SHC communicates a sense of being “modern” and fashionable. Meaning, not only does the wearer become wealthier, and thus able to purchase “foreign” clothing to express their outward appearance, but also that he/she has the freedom to brisk “authenticity” (using original unique garments) while showing “self-made” styles (e.g. the way exclusives, patterns, colours, shapes, etc. are mixed into one style). But behind this “authenticity” an intense global commerce controlled by charity organizations is the land for the growing informal business along Maputo streets as the next section highlights.

SHC Market in Maputo: Informality and Organic Display

With the increasing growth of SHC commerce, shipping containers of used-clothing are being unloaded in the busy streets of Maputo, like the areas of *Baixa* and *Alto Maé*, where most of the importers' warehouses are concentrated. SHC arrives from many different locations such as Australia, Europe and North America and is controlled by charity organizations, as highlighted by Brooks (2013, p. 22) and also referred by some of the traders we interviewed on our field-study in 2011.

There is no formal organization of SHC trade in Maputo and therefore most of it is solely based on informal networks of commerce. On the streets, although there are many men do-



Image 4. Second-hand belts for sale in the streets. Records from the fieldwork, Maputo, April 2011. © Sofia Vilarinho



Image 5. Three students in school uniforms. Records from my fieldwork, Maputo, May 2011. © Sofia Vilarinho

Image 6. A girl from Maxaquene. Records from my fieldwork, Maputo, May 2011. © Sofia Vilarinho



employers» (2009, p. 28) to obtain insider knowledge to guarantee a good bale for business.⁵

The organic structure displayed at the sale location is also important. In each «street shop» (locally named *mudzudzação*) SHC is separately organized into its different categories: while t-shirts, blouses or trousers go together on one side, accessories like shoes, belts and bags are displayed separately from clothes. At open-air markets like *Xipamanine*, there is a specific place for each category of clothes, for example there is an assigned location for men's suits, bras, shirts, a different place for men's shoes, and so on.

Finally, there are the *hawkers* who sell only one category of clothes (see Image 4) and can be found peddling the streets for random customers. In some cases clothes are carefully selected and organized according to a «fine eye» for stylistic combinations, but in other cases clothes are just thrown together in chaotic bundles, «dumped in piles on the ground which complicates the process of commodification» (Hansen 2005, p. 110).

Amongst the most desirable items are American or Australian used clothing, not only because of the common representation around foreign garments, but also because they come in bigger sizes. As a seller at *Xikelene* market explained to us: «Australian and American cloths fit an African body better». SHC prices are variable, but often the harder it is to find a certain item, the pricier it becomes, like, for example «the bra is the most expensive clothing and then follows the man's suit» explains a vendor at *Janete's* market.

The intense relationship between charity organizations, *Mamas*, small-scale vendors, itinerant traders and tailors around SHC adds a local and particular angle to this business, and nowadays *xi-calamidade* attracts all social groups, but mainly those from middle and lower classes, as well as local youngsters looking for vintage items that better suit their interest for a more cosmopolitan style attire. The next section will highlight how SHC is an item for fashion(able) practices while shaping single identities.

SHC Fashion(able): Upcycling and Renewal

Aware of how global SHC is changing local fashion consumption practices in Mozambique, and how these same social and cultural behaviours enable newer fashion(able) looks every time,⁶ in this sub-section we take a closer look at two different situations. SHC clothing used for personal styles – two different dress-styles (shown in Images 5 and 6, respectively) worn by youngsters we encountered during our fieldwork in the streets of Maputo and also SHC used to develop a fashion brand.

The first example (Image 5) shows three boys wearing SHC school uniforms, an outfit timely standardized after the country's independence (1975). As we can see, although all three boys are wearing the same uniform, each one uses it differently by adding his very own personal touch. While the boy

in the middle kept the somehow homogeneous look of his school uniform, the boy on the left refashioned the uniform in a hip-hop mood, cutting the trousers, taking the tie off, adding a red t-shirt under the uniform's white shirt, as well as the typical baseball cap, completing his style with a pair of customized sneaker-boots and red sunglasses, while the boy on the right just changed the length of his uniform's tie unbuttoning the shirt's top button to give it a more casual look. The second example (Image 6) shows the style worn by a young Mozambican girl is yet even more representative of a “new” trendy look that mixes tradition with modernity, and which originality is portrayed by the combination of a traditional *capulana* - wrapped in a quite trendy way around her neck and waist - with a pair of second-hand shorts and an oversized pair of tall used boots. This look is particularly relevant of a resurgent Dress Culture decoding influences between Western and African styles. This young girl created her own fashion statement by displaying her personal sense of modern style while reaffirming her bond to her Mozambican grassroots, sartorially.

Just as in the globalizing fashion centres in Europe and North America, in Maputo consumers' preference for vintage styles has apparently gained its momentum, as SHC market grows wider and stronger. Hansen (2009, p. 115) justifies that the appeal of SHC «cannot be explained merely in terms of its affordability to poor people, but above all by reference to the importance people attribute to dress and appearance». A good example of this reference, featuring new applications of SHC that (re)create (or renew) vintage fashionable pieces, is given by Maputo-based brand *Mima-te*⁷ (which in Portuguese means both spoil yourself and take care of yourself) where design-work has emerged as the first *upcycling* approach to SHC in Mozambique. According to its founders, their work is basically to «*upcycle* and re-new old vintage clothes found at local markets in Maputo, and turn them into fashionable, modern and unique clothes». They make use of SHC to produce their dresses and to spark a debate on recycling and sustainability in a country where these concepts are seldom used.

To summarize, here again with Palmer and Clark (2005, p. 173) *Mima-te* brand is using SHC as their main «material whereby consumers can play with the past to create modern identities». Each discarded clothing has a life story which documents several memories: the location of production, when it was acquired, who the owner was, how many times it was used, in which occasion it was used, the day when it was discarded, etc. «When we work with a discarded garment we will give a second-life to it», says one of the brand founders. More stories will be added while re-working the biography of this garment.

Finally, the stories registered on a used garment create a new space for reflection on the process of “self-making”.

Standpoint: Fieldwork Conclusions

Urban centers like Maputo are a platform for cultural and identity processes made from personal interpretations and translations of (foreign) used clothes.

As analysed in this article, we find particular values in SHC trade because it creates new spaces for reflection on: a) iden-

Moda di seconda mano. L'avanguardia delle nuove tendenze a Maputo

Nel mercato della moda mondiale nuove dinamiche sono state innestate dal commercio di vestiti usati. Questi ultimi giungono in Africa dai Paesi sviluppati (perlopiù tramite organizzazioni di beneficenza) e vengono adattati dai sarti locali. Per questo, indossarli significa anche rinegoziare la propria identità: esibendo prodotti di provenienza estera si comunica un miglioramento della propria situazione economica, senza comunque rinunciare all'aggiunta di un originale tocco autoctono.

Questo articolo esamina il contesto della circolazione dei vestiti di seconda mano (l'universo della moda mozambicana e la moda di strada in particolare) nella città di Maputo al fine di spiegare come gli “scarti dell'Occidente” diventino materiale di base per esplorare la creatività di stilisti emergenti e lo stile personale della nuova generazione.

Il fenomeno della “xi-calמידade” (il nome dato a Maputo al commercio dei vestiti di seconda mano) permette ai consumatori di esprimere i loro ideali estetici, i loro sogni e desideri (come quello di vestire in maniera esclusiva, originale e giovane). Analizzando questa pratica e i suoi attori è possibile tracciare, sulla mappa di una grande città cosmopolita, un itinerario “di moda” tra magazzini, donne dedite al commercio all'ingrosso e piccoli rivenditori.

Quanto al metodo, assieme a una raccolta di informazioni che ha attinto anche da *blog* personali e *social network*, sono stati applicati principalmente approcci di ricerca qualitativi. Il *coolhunting* (l'osservazione delle tendenze culturali formate o evolute nei *media*) è stato necessario per analizzare gli aspetti originali della moda locale e della pratica della moda sociale.

I risultati di questa ricerca mostrano come i vestiti di seconda mano siano stati assorbiti nella vita quotidiana e come gli stilisti locali siano consapevoli delle tendenze legate alla xi-calמידade nella moda di strada. Questo lavoro vuol essere anche un contributo alle discussioni sui vestiti di seconda mano come mezzo per negoziare identità e autenticità.

tity associated with the value of an authentic garment; b) business behind it; and c) fashion(able) processes that favour “new” and cosmopolitan looks.

The presented case studies show that SHC consumption is less passive compared to ready-to-wear consumption. SHC becomes their medium to develop fashionable ways of creating clothes while expressing their Mozambican identity.

There’s no global trend that guides SHC, because SHC is exclusive. The user becomes a fashionable narrator while being author of his own guise. Frequently, used clothing is translated into new fashions by mixing different times, textures, patterns, traditional garments, stories and memories together: visual allocation to be looked at as alternative to ready-to-wear. In these contexts, SHC is a medium for change. A powerful trade made from garments that were doomed to uselessness that gives a second-life for clothing that promotes the cutting-edge of the new fashion.

An SHC mind-set highlights how a business may document and develop cultural values and identity meanings while transforming the old into a new garment that enables a fashionable process to question homogenous approaches to style created by the ready-to-wear industry. Used clothes become the medium to create and re-create styles that may «talk back» to the system. But also to work consciousness for a sustainable world by giving a new life to clothes therefore decreasing waste. From this perspective, SHC is yesterday’s fashion for tomorrow’s styles.

From the several interviews that we were allowed to do and other fieldwork observation it is possible to realize, quite conclusively, that the way broader Western Fashion system codes are constantly being (re)applied at the local scale, can be linked - as referred to by Kawamura (2004) - to the very structural nature of the Western garment and Fashion market itself, by the way it works to legitimize not only designers’ creativity but also people’s consuming behaviors. Yet, after our observation in the field we came across another point of view that has enriched the perspective of Mozambique’s modern sartorial practices. In fact, it is quite common to find in Maputo’s urban context that people know how to (re)present Western aesthetic standards and perceptions of Dress. This representation however is evident of the way African Dress Culture is overall very permeable to Western style fashion and clothing (whether new or used) and how strongly it potentiates the creation of new styles that often express, rather distinctively, an interaction between the local and the global spheres. In short, with Moorman, «clothing consciousness act of self-styling gives local forms of dress a new meaning» (2004, p. 88). Still contrary to what one might think, the phenomenon behind Westernization (here focused on clothing) has actually induced the rebirth of Mozambican national pride by bringing forward the importance of keeping cultural traditions of sartorial alive, while redefining a new Dress identity in contemporary Maputo.

NOTES

1 - In Maputo the fieldwork was conducted from April and May 2011.

2 - Usually, tailors’ workshops are located on the streets or at the municipal markets where it is common to find them sharing improvised selling spots with SHC retailers.

3 - These “new generations” are all the youth who have come to age with the independence (in 1975) and especially from the end of the civil war (in 1992) onwards.

4 - Cfr Brooks 2013, p. 27.

5 - This particular strategy was also referred to by the smaller SHC traders we interviewed in 2011.

6 - It is important to clarify the concept behind the fashion(able) meaning of “I’m able to make fashion”. This is the *ideology* that justifies the model of production and consumption layered by processes of creativity where the users are engaged as co-authors of fashion, which will be capable of inventing ways that allow them to produce that particular “original” style they aim for.

7 - For further information on this brand check out their website: www.mimate-maputo.com.

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