

My Way

I was born by the river in Podor in the region of Fouta, in northern Senegal. When my father died when I was only five years old, I realised that I would have to fend for myself and make my own livelihood. And starting off with dolls, I have channelled my energies into what has become my career as a fashion designer ever since.

Out of respect for the words of my father, I did not go to school and I can neither read nor write. I attended Koran school and spent my childhood and youth in the northern region of Fouta and in my mother's region of origin in southern Senegal, Casamance.

I opened my first workshop at the age of 13 and started making clothes for my friends and acquaintances.

I now live in the Medina in Dakar and my fashion and costume design activities cover high fashion tailoring and ready-to-wear clothing, jewellery and accessories, costume design for the cinema and the performing arts and interior and furniture design. I have also been working on the design of a unique collection of kings and queens of Africa for many years.

In the course of my trips abroad, I have taught intensive courses organised by chambers of trade or art schools in Brussels, Milan and Geneva. I have also taught at Dakar art school. It was this teaching activity which gave me the idea of setting up the Leydi workshops in Senegal to provide training in fashion design and modern and traditional techniques of costume and jewellery design. This training activity is also to be understood as a contribution to maintaining and reviving the traditional techniques which I use in the field of weaving, dyeing, embroidery, leather working, jewellery, make-up, hair-dressing, etc.

Since 1997 I have been organising the annual international fashion week, Simod, and the Dakar Carnival, a ten-day event attended by fashion designers from all corners of the globe as a platform for African and in particular Senegalese fashion designers. It also provides interesting career opportunities for up-and-coming designers, in particular the young hopefuls from the Leydi workshops. The Simod and the Dakar Carnival transform Senegal and Africa into a crossroads and centre of international fashion.

These activities in turn led to the establishment of the Macsy model training agency which not only trains models but also offers the young professionals assistance in their subsequent career follow-up.

In 1996, I set up Metissacana, the first cybercafé on the African continent outside South Africa. It has meanwhile become a full Internet provider and recognised as a pioneer of information and communication technologies in Africa.

Alongside all these activities, I am also very much involved in action designed to revitalise the rural world and help it break out of its isolation.



A Brief Status Report

A brief status report on the world of fashion and fashion design and all the related trades and occupations shows that Africa boasts a great wealth of skills in this field which offers a real potential for development.

An infinite number of dressmaking, needlework, tailoring, embroidery, leather working and jewellery workshops are busy all over the continent; countless numbers of craftspeople are at work using various techniques of weaving and fabric processing. The fashion and textile exhibitions organised all over the continent every year bear witness to the dynamism of this sector of activity. African designers are moving into foreign markets and are regularly invited to organise fashion shows to present their work to the public abroad where retail outlets are mushrooming. As the media coverage of e.g. the Simod shows, there is a real interest in African fashion designers outside the continent.

Our young hopefuls also participate in major international shows and events, bringing home prestigious awards. Leydi workshop students have returned with awards from "Design 21", Lisbon, the gold and bronze "Scissors", Abidjan, and Kora Rubis, Johannesburg, as well as prizes from the Biennale des Arts, St-Etienne, France, the Brussels "Faut que ca bouge" and international jewellery competitions in Montreal and Berlin.

The destiny of African fashion and fashion design is therefore decided on both the national and international stage. This sector offers a real potential and genuine prospects of economic development at international level. Moreover, despite the tendency of African consumers to follow western fashion trends to the detriment of "made in Africa", the national market is far from saturated.

Promoting "Made in Africa"

In the age of globalisation, "made in Africa" is a strong and dynamic concept which symbolises not only a market or an economic value, but also an African identity and a positive image of Africa. It can contribute to the general introduction of an "Africa" label.

"Made in Africa" is a symbol of identity for international consumers who are paying increasing attention to African cultures and promoting the cross-fertilisation of African and western fashions, colours and patterns. But "made in Africa" is also a symbol of identity for all Africans who are so much oriented towards the west that they sometimes unconsciously deny their roots and origins, consumers who copy western styles of dress although they cannot really afford to. "made in Africa"



means that western fashion may be reproduced and imitated more economically by African designers and craftspeople.

"Made in Africa" is a response to the delicate problem of second-hand clothing which is a violation of human dignity. Local production is a response to the fundamental need of the population to dress at an accessible price. Private initiative plays an essential role in upgrading the "made in Africa" concept in the shape of the designers' efforts to bring their articles into the marketplace. Globalisation may be viewed from different angles. I myself tend to see it as an opportunity to overcome borders and to help the individual break out of his or her isolation. Of course the financial consortia are at an advantage when it comes to conquering the world market and the risk of everything becoming uniform and standardised is even greater today than ever before. But this pressure on consumers whets their appetites to stand out from the crowd—which is in turn to the advantage of craftspeople who now benefit from rapid and inexpensive means of communication and services.

Plagiarism and Piracy—the Need for Industrialisation

Against this background, recognition of the "made in Africa" label will only be a success if it is accompanied by the necessary economic dimension so that it can really be of benefit to the continent.

It is prejudicial to Africa when an original and unique African article is copied, reproduced and marketed by western channels at international level. It is not so much the plagiarism which is prejudicial because the copy, rarely as valuable as the original, is ultimately a sign of recognition of the designer. The main problem caused by plagiarism or piracy is the loss of earnings it implies and the barriers to market access it represents.

What Africa urgently needs is the industrialisation of this sector along with financial partners from the North who have the necessary experience in terms of distribution and market access to guarantee a motivating return on investment.

This in turn calls for a greater degree of professionalisation and appropriate policies designed to upgrade this sector in Africa, provide vocational training and job integration, promote the "made in Africa" concept, capture markets, stimulate exports and decentralise production facilities.

Training and Professionalisation

Vocational training and the professionalisation of the sector are one of the keys to the development of the local market and the success of the "made in Africa" label.

The present organisation of the sector remains largely dominated by

- the popular economy, more commonly known under the more pejorative term of the "informal" economy,
- the problem of reaching markets beyond the local context (village, neighbourhood, etc.)
- the difficulty of customer retention as a result of deficits in manufacturing quality,
- the problem of meeting supply deadlines.

This situation is due to the chronic isolation of Africa and the laxity of South/North trade.

Over and above the fact that industrialisation does not yet feature on the African national policy agendas, there is a lack of enterprise culture and a even greater lack of awareness of the need for vocational training. Professionalisation can only be achieved by the creation of an effective symbiosis between the national private sector, the administration, national policies, international cooperation and partnership with foreign entrepreneurs and investors.

The dynamics of professionalisation calls for efforts at the level of vocational training, penetration of foreign export markets and the development of outsourcing and decentralisation of production facilities. These efforts must be rooted in the local markets with active promotion of the "made in Africa" concept. Awareness-raising is necessary to make the population realise that it is only work that pays and that being on the receiving end of the support chain is not an occupation. Moreover, the support and assistance strategies which merely serve to perpetuate the African poverty trap must be eradicated. Each and every player in the field of fashion and fashion design, right down to the level of the simple artisan, must be given the chance to become and remain competitive, to meet and stimulate demand, to assume the role of producer, exporter or supplier and to think along market economy lines, even if the market is limited.

The question of training must also be taken on board in the context of the transfer of know how in both directions, North/South-South/North, especially as westerners are now showing an increasing interest in learning our techniques.

Traditional African techniques still serve as the basis for a plethora of economic, crafts, semi-industrial and industrial activities, now reaching beyond the African context and extending throughout the entire world. The blend between the traditional and the modern and the symbiosis of the techniques of the South and the North in terms of cross-fertilisation constitute an alchemistic process opening up enormous opportunities for development. The careers of some of our leading designers bear witness to the fact that progress and evolution need not be equated with denial of one's origins or rejection of one's tradition.

Projects for the Future

Leydi workshops

The Leydi workshops which I opened in 1998 serve as an example of a national and international training centre fulfilling the objectives and aims set out above.

No matter what their length of training, and whether it be of a general or more specialised nature, trainees must come out of the learning process with an overview of the entire production chain—ranging from the weaving of the yarn, through embroi-



dery and fabric dyeing, working the bronze, silver or ivory, to the final decoration or ornamentation of the article—and gain an insight into their role and responsibility within this overall production chain. This awareness is the seed of the spirit of professionalism which is acquired in the world of work.

Evidently not everyone can become a fashion designer, but everyone can become an excellent craftsperson with a full command of the entire production chain leading to the final ready-to-wear garment—if only they put their minds to it. In this context, safeguarding the heritage and the cultural identities of the continent and averting the danger of the eclipse of traditional techniques play an essential role. Rather than archiving these techniques, does it not seem to make more sense to keep them alive and pass them on?

We understand the “fashion and fashion design” sector in the broader sense and do not intend to confine ourselves to the capitals and bigger towns. Talent and young hopefuls can be found everywhere, and are such as diversified as the market itself. Leydi workshops provide a structure for the training of craftspeople who will be able to work in the units of production in the villages and in the semi-industrial electric weaving unit which I am planning to open and for which I am currently seeking financial partners.

Why a weaving mill

The art of weaving is an integral part of the African heritage. African weaving looks back on a centuries-old tradition, not least in Senegal, where this tradition is particularly strong.

In the course of my visits to the villages of Fouta and Casamance in my childhood and youth, I learned various traditional hand weaving techniques, both patterned and unpatterned. Later, in the course of my research, I came across articles woven on electric looms from the North -most of which were largely obsolete and ready

for the scrap yard—but which nevertheless produce “hand made” quality; moreover, by using these looms it is possible to increase the width of the web.

This means that weaving has real potential to develop into an industry in Africa provided that it is possible to expand production capacity and move into the field of interior furnishing and design. African weaving could thus find a niche in the international market, in which the African identity is so much in demand but where the potential investors are reluctant to work with local structures. It is now up to the designers and the craftspeople to play their card... which led me to this idea of setting up a semi-industrial weaving mill in Senegal.

Industrialisation does not imply the end of craft or hand made work; on the contrary, the idea is to preserve existing production and cater for a certain demand. It is a matter of extending this craftsmanship in the form of intensive and serial production, combined with a distribution and marketing infrastructure.

Village production units

Alongside this weaving mill, production units must be set up in the villages. The villages in question are to be identified according to their weaving heritage and centuries of traditional skills.

For example, a village in the south of the country might be identified as a centre of excellence for hand weaving, whereas another village might specialise in leather working, gold or bronze jewellery and accessories, dyeing, etc. The village production unit would provide value added to this know how in the form of equipment to cut, sew and embroider the fabric and produce a finished product. These units could strike a financial balance between local demand and external orders.

This approach seems to be the most appropriate for the African context and it is certainly more viable than yielding to the temptation of setting up a large-scale production unit in Dakar, and making the craftspeople leave their villages to come and work in the capital.

International distribution

Distribution is the final link in this economic chain.

This idea is also the logical follow-up to the current media hype surrounding African designers, not only in the fashion world. The very existence of this media hype indicates that there is a demand out there and the market is just waiting to be tapped. It will not be enough to attract financial donors who think in terms of assistance or guidance in the financing of structures if projects of this kind are to be developed and markets penetrated because these agencies do not operate in the field. What we need is to develop financial partnerships, even if it means establishing joint African-western ventures with the financial participation of investors interested in supplying these familiar markets, ready to decentralise series production and conscious of the dynamism and the potential of the “made in Africa” label for the international market.

Translated from the French by Stephen Conn