

STITCHING SUCCESS: A DEEP DIVE INTO CHALLENGES FACING DRESS FASHION DESIGN IN THE GHANAIAN FASHION LANDSCAPE

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Abstract: *Fashion has deep roots in African culture, evolving over centuries in unique and localized forms. Prior to industrialization, individuals often crafted their own clothing or worked closely with bespoke tailors to create distinct, personalized garments. Mass production of fashion trends for global markets is in its infancy in Africa, and this landscape carries both strengths and weaknesses.*

In Ghana, the fashion system prominently features bespoke garments, fostering a competitive environment that fuels creative fashion design. For example, the kaba and slit couture in Ghana continually introduces a myriad of new designs to the bespoke market, making it a vibrant sector within the country's fashion industry. This local fashion system is distinctive in the sense that those who wear bespoke garments become walking models, displaying their unique kaba and slit designs at various social occasions.

A communal lifestyle in African society means that social events serve as participatory runways, where attendees keenly observe new designs. This dynamic contributes to the rapid dissemination of fashion trends, with attendees often inspired to mimic or modify these styles. However, one notable weakness of this system is the perpetuation of designer anonymity, as many creators operate without recognized brands, and they are often undercompensated for their creative designs due to limited mass production.

Keywords: *African Fashion, Bespoke Garments, Fashion Dissemination, Designer Anonymity, Cultural Fashion*

1. Introduction

Fashion in itself is not a new phenomenon in African trade and industry. It has been with the continent for centuries but in less industrialised form comparable to what pertains in the Western countries. People designed and produced their own clothes (Fernie, 2003) and or cultivated bespoke habits of prescribing unique clothes to be produced by their sartorial producers before the advent of the industrial revolution. Walking to fashion designers for bespoke garments, heavily characterizes the

fashion system of Africa. Mass production of specific trend for mass marketing globally is still at its infantile stages in Africa. This situation has its strengths and weaknesses. It has oiled the wheels of competitive creative fashion designs on the continent. For instance, in Ghana, the *kaba* (blouse) and slit couture creations introduces hundreds of new designs on the bespoke market every day. Such a competitive avenue is healthy for the Ghanaian fashion industry. With this local fashion system in Ghana, the bespoke garment wearers are walking models of their usually exclusive *kaba* and slit designs whatever the occasion— funerals, naming ceremony, marriage ceremony, puberty rites and other social gatherings. By the communalistic living of Africans in general, the grounds of social occasions become participatory runways for all present. In this atmosphere, the eyes of the ‘walking models’ and their respective ‘model observers’ scramble through the gathering for new designs. Out of ten youthful female adults who often attend social gatherings, at least six of them, amongst other things, would be spying on new *kaba* designs to mimic or modify. The trick-across theory of fashion dissemination operates within this local fashion system of Ghana. One of the weaknesses of this system is that it perpetuates designer anonymity. Many fashion designers who create these designs, sadly, operate under no labels for revelation of their brand identities. Besides, they are not well paid for their creative designs since the designs are not mass-produced.

The need for adaptation and proper implementation of workable fashion system network of –textile companies, garment manufacturing companies, retailers, trade associations, fashion magazines, designers, photographers, stylists and models (Skou & Melchoir, 2008, p.13), in addition to the bespoke fashion in Ghana to spice up the existing local fashion capitalism system is paramount. Jansson and Power (2010, p. 890) examine the ways through which the reputation and image of certain cities as fashion and design capitals are constructed; and how the interconnected industry actors use certain cities for their own branding and differentiation strategies to gain competitive advantage in the globalised industry. They suggest in that case study that –multi-channel systems of brand building and differentiation co-exist at regional and local levels; and that these are supportive of, and constituted by, image-producing industries. For cultural and image-producing industries, these systems can be interpreted as vital regional sources of advantage and necessary complements to more material localized phenomena such as industrial agglomerations and clusters.

The network of fashion ecosystem identified works hand in hand in the globalised fashion. Each fashion organ in the globalised system depends on each other and create huge employment avenue for people. Globalised fashion trade has its own negative tendencies. Fernie (2003) cautions against the impression held that global fashion is superior to *traditional* way. He pointed out that, that is not necessarily the case, though it has boosted world trade by blurring continents into one unit with a competitive advantage of reaching for more clients than before. Globalisation has created an open market for businesses to reach out to more clients to boost trade. As the potential markets expand, there would obviously be increase in demand of products or services, which the manual production

without the use of industrialised mechanisms could support. Reasons for the low trade impact in the fashion industry in Africa is largely due to low industrialisation and application of modern technologies, especially, in the production process; and policy implementation. With global trade force, the fashion industry keeps expanding at a faster rate. The 2005 Mintel Report as cited in Masson, Iosif, MacKerron and Fernie (2007) considers the European mass fashion retail market as the second largest in the world with growth exceeding that of the market as a whole. It supported this statement with examples, using the success story of UK's clothing sales that reached £37 billion in 2004, a 20 per cent increase over year 2000. Total exports for global clothing and textiles in 2007 were valued at US\$628.4 billion, and positioned the UK fashion sector as one of the most traded manufactured products in the world (Moris & Barnes, 2009). This demonstrates the viability of globalised trade in placing businesses at a competitive advantage.

Ghana's government launched the Presidential Special Initiative (PSI) on textiles and garment manufacturing in 2001 with the advent of African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) to help the sector to grow and participate actively in export trade. AGOA was signed in 2000 and run till 2004 with further extension until 2015. The focus of the Act was to give dutyfree status to oil and oil products export to the US while the US give eligible countries that produce clothing and textiles dutyfree export opportunity to US. It covered 40 African countries including others in sub-Saharan Africa as of 2007, of which 27 were eligible for preferential treatment on textiles and clothing (Lane & Probert, 2009). In Ghana, thirteen (13) companies were selected to benefit from the initiative, of which some could not benefit from the programme because it was rolled out in batches for the companies and some could not get their turn, perhaps due to change in government in 2008. But of all the African beneficiary countries, US Office of Textiles and Apparel (OTEXA) data show that between 1995 and 2007, the AGOA countries accounted for a tiny US\$27 million of exports equivalent to less than 3% which is totally insignificant considering its impact on the US market (Lane & Probert, 2009, p. 66 - 67). Plain knit shirts and trousers are the two main categories of exports from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The –USA mostly offers easier access only to countries where its own textile and/or clothing companies are likely to have business interests. (Lane & Probert, 2009, p. 126) AGOA is not necessarily a win-win bilateral trade scheme as perceived.

Before the introduction of AGOA, there has been trade liberalisation system, which was part of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) to mitigate the problem of shortage of foreign exchange in importing raw materials to feed the industries in 1980s and beyond (Quartey, 2006). AGOA was introduced with the hope of boosting the Ghana fashion industry to contribute to economic growth. This study is premised on ascertaining the major challenges that hamper the growth of dress fashion design in the Ghana fashion industry in the perspective of both beneficiary and non-beneficiary fashion designers of the social intervention trade policies aimed at promoting fashion development. The term dress fashion, in the context of the study, refers to tailor-made clothing.

2. **Methodology**

The narrative inquiry research tool that requires narratively inquiring into individuals' experiences over a period of time and putting them into context and organising the study such that there exist relational engagement between the researcher and the participants (Clandinin & Caine, 2008) was used. One of the ways in conducting narrative research is to engage the experiences contained in the lived and told stories of research participants and analysing them through narrative analysis in retelling the stories of the individuals in a chronological manner with a social, cultural and historical twist and an eye on the important themes in the lived experiences (Creswel, 2007).

Narrative inquiry has the ability to transform fragments of collected data into 'well-plotted, artistic forms that utilise the conventions of fictional literature to present not just a more ordered rendering of life but an aesthetically rich one' that helps in understanding and retaining of the information (Saldana, 2011, p.12). The stories from the respondents were organised and fused with the few existing *field text* (existing documents). The use of the narrative inquiry yielded the narrative understanding of the lived experiences of the fashion designer-respondents.

The accessible population for the study consisted of forty (40) Ghanaian dress fashion designers from which twelve were purposively sampled. The criteria for selection consisted of minimum of ten (10) years in active practise, dress fashion shows held (exhibitions), quality and uniqueness of exhibits, awards obtained (local or international) and major influential contributions to the field of dress fashion design. In addition, the respondents' participation in AGOA was considered. The researcher screened them to arrive at twelve (12) respondents, consisting of seven (7) beneficiaries of AGOA and five (5) non-beneficiaries.

Both text-based and non-textual primary and secondary data were collected for the study. Primary data are original eyewitness accounts and documents. As a fertile area, primary data was the main source of data used and supplemented with secondary data. It included information from semi-structured interviews, fashion show video documentaries, field notes and fashion magazines. The semi-structured interviews enabled the respondents to share their lived experiences in their fashion design careers. Open-ended questions were crafted to allow the respondents in narrating their stories in relation to the challenges they face in their work. Follow-up questions meant to seek further clarification of the told lived stories were posed during the interview sessions.

Based on the data gathered, thematic analysis, a flexible and content-sensitive tool (Krippendorff, 1980; Harwood & Garry, 2003; Cole, 1988) was used to generate categories, themes and explanations that was derived from phrases, behaviours, patterns and incidents. This helped in analysing their major challenges they face as fashion designers.

3. **Results and Discussion**

a. *Influx of smuggled cheap imported dress fashion products; and retailing by foreigners*

To unravel the major challenges Ghanaian dress fashion designers face in the pursuit of their work, the iconic fashion designers identified in the study were asked to outline their challenges. From the responses given, top on the list was the influx of smuggled cheap imported dress fashion products on the Ghanaian market (96%). Most of these cheap and usually inferior products that find their way onto the Ghanaian market pass through the loose Ghanaian borders, which cost the nation millions of cedis. Since the products are not screened for quality checks and the required taxes imposed on them, they hit the market and are sold at very low prices that compete strongly with the local products. This unfair competition has had serious consequences their on dress fashion businesses. In the estimation of the respondents, chunk of the cheap clothing and textile goods are principally imported from the Asiatic countries especially, China, with the others from Europe and America. Several studies (Quartey, 2006; Sarpong, Howard & Osei-Ntiri, 2011; Asare, 2012; Uqalo, 2015) have confirmed this report and needs efficient solution.

Another reason the respondents ascribed to the influx of cheap dress fashion products on the Ghanaian market was the involvement of foreigners in retailing instead of establishing fashion industries. The respondents blamed this cataclysmic business situation on ineffective and inefficient enforcement of laws on the borders. According to the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre Act, 2013 (Act, 865): *“A person who is not a citizen or an enterprise which is not wholly owned by citizen shall not invest or participate in: (a) the sale of goods or provision of services in a market, petty trading or hawking or selling of goods in a stall at any place.”* This Act clearly proscribes foreigners in engaging in petty trading and further stipulates that a foreigner could engage in trading by investing not less than one million US Dollars in cash or goods and services relevant to the investment. In addition, such a business or enterprise must employ at least twenty skilled Ghanaians.

This is meant to protect Ghanaian businesses from unhealthy competition from foreigners. However, its thorough enforcement, according to the designers is woefully inadequate.

b. Little governmental support to the industry

Respondents (designers) raised the issue of Ghana government providing little support (92%). It is the responsibility of government to create business friendly environment to assist the private sector, often referred to as the engine of business growth, to expand and create more job avenues for the populace. However, in the view of the respondents, government has provided them with little or no support in terms of providing them with credit facilities, industrial machineries and other needed equipment for the growth of their individual businesses. Instead, there is high tariff on the machinery and equipment they struggle to purchase, rocketing high the cost of doing business thereby causing stunted growth of dress fashion businesses. To them some of the industrial machines used for mass production are highly expensive and individual designers could not afford. They also listed the absence of a statutory authority/body to censor fashion products from Ghana for quality standard checks before exportation to other countries to protect Ghana’s fashion image on the international fashion scene. Studies on

Ghana's textiles and garments manufacturing have hinted this problem of little governmental support for the sector (Quartey, 2006; Asare, 2012; Ghana Chamber of Commerce and Industry, n.d).

c. Low accessibility to preferred fabric type, quality and quantity

The designers also complained about low accessibility of both local and foreign preferred fabric type and quality to create with (90%). Most of these designers have been influenced by locally manufactured textiles products such as kente and smock fabrics, wax prints amongst others. Their patronage of these locally manufactured textile products help the growth of the local textiles industry and create employment for both the fashion designers and other Ghanaian nationals who are employed in the local textile firms. The limitation of manual production of local cotton-based fabrics – kente and smock fabrics – could not meet their demands in terms of quantity of yards needed to produce, for instance, one thousand pieces of sample order for a particular garment design for distribution across sale centres. Manual production of these fabrics, according to the respondents is affecting production negatively. Dzrmedo and Dabuo (2015, p.41) in their study of the challenges and sustainability of smock weaving using 192 respondents in the West Gonja District of the Northern Region reported that the smock fabric production has potential export market but lacks mass production approaches due to manual production. As a result, the sector is unable to meet the demand of local consumers let alone the foreign market. The Ghana Chamber of Commerce and Industry (n.d) have indicated that Ghana has not exported enough to offsetting its imports under the AGOA trade and therefore has deficit in export of garment and textiles products. This is a confirmation of what the designers pointed out that their demand of large volumes of locally produced fabrics such as smocks and kente is not met.

Respondents considered the production of solely cotton-based fabrics in Ghanaian textiles manufacturing firms as a limitation to their design. Design is influenced by many factors including the colour, texture, appearance, drape, contrast and variety of all the fashionable elements that come into play in fashion designing (Calderin, 2011; Volpintesta, 2014). To them, availability of different fabric both – woven and non-woven in addition to the existing ones is a potential inspiration to the design abilities. Some of the dress design collections depend on imported fabrics. These fabric imports attract high import tariff, which affect the pricing of their finished dress fashion products.

d. Power supply (electric) concerns

Electricity power crisis, popularly referred to as *dumsor*, has caused the collapse of businesses and retrenchment of workers employed in the private sector, in the view of majority (88%) of the respondents. This problem received much research interest due to its glaring effect on the nation's economy. Many business groups, agencies and individuals went on demonstration in demand for amicable solutions to the problem. Under normal circumstances, Ghana's attainment of middle-income status should commiserate with its productive sector for business growth. However, the devastating effect of the erratic power supply has caused low profitability and competitiveness of small and medium scale businesses. This problem has equally had its toll on dress fashion businesses. The designers

reported of breakdown in electric powered equipment, low productivity, inability to meet deadlines of consumers, high cost of doing business due to the problem. Studies conducted (Centre for Policy Analysis, 2007; Frederick & Selase, 2014; Braimah & Amponsah, 2012; Anyidoho, 2015, Oct 13) on the effects of the erratic power supply points to the fact that it has forced businesses to close-down, caused unemployment, initiated high cost of doing business.

Reduction in labour force, high cost of living, mitigation of profits and low competitive advantage of Ghanaian business firms. More so, the cost of electric power supply is considered unbearable and inimical to business growth.

e. Inadequate and unsteady fashion labour force

In every buoyant fashion industry, the chain of fashion workers works hand in hand. The business of fashion is a mega industry on its own that employs thousands of workers based on its market size. The workers include fashion designers, technicians (machinists), fashion coordinators, fashion models, cosmetologists, illustrators, stylists, photographers, costume designers, fashion educators (historians, teachers), writers (journalists, bloggers, editors) and merchandisers (Career in Focus, 2007). Each has a role to play in the sustainability of the industry. Where there is unavailability of some of these labour force the industry does not progress as it is supposed to. For instance, when a fashion designer envisions his/her designs, s/he shares it with the fashion illustrator who will develop several illustrations to create consistent collections. The pattern maker then converts the designs into patterns, for the cutters to do the cutting and the machinists to do the sewing. Even when the whole design and construction process is done and the collections hit the runway, the work of the fashion writers and photographers is so crucial for the publicity of the designs. To the designers (75%) this cohort of fashion labour force is scarce with some totally non-existent. This, they believe, also negatively affects the business of fashion in Ghana. A typical instance the designers cited was the lack of professionally trained fashion journalists/press with in-depth knowledge in fashion operations to render aesthetic commentary on the creation of designers.

4. Conclusions

It is evident from the study that major challenges hampering the growth of dress fashion design industry in Ghana include influx of smuggled cheap imported dress fashion products from the Asiatic countries, Europe and America; and retailing of dress fashion products by foreigners. Government must, therefore, ensure rigorous enforcement of the laws on smuggled goods to protect Ghanaian dress fashion businesses, while the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre Act, 2013 (Act, 865) that proscribes foreigners in engaging in petty trading be observed strictly.

There is also little governmental support in providing credit facilities, industrial machineries and other needed equipment for the fashion designers. Government must support the fashion design industry with credit facilities, tax waivers, industrial machineries and other needed equipment for expansion. Another challenge is the absence of a statutory authority/body to censor fashion products to and from

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Ghana for quality checks before importation and or exportation respectively. It is recommended that a Fashion Council be established which must have oversight responsibility of promoting quality control of fashion products for export purposes to protect the nation's fashion image and to check imported fashion products.

Besides, the production of mainly cotton-based fabrics in Ghanaian textiles manufacturing firms is a limitation to the design material exploration of the fashion designers. Ghanaian textiles firms must veer into the production of nonwoven fabrics in addition to the production of cotton-based fabrics to increase creativity of Ghanaian fashion designing. The cost of electric power supply and the state of its erraticness is inimical to dress fashion business growth in Ghana. There is scarcity of fashion labour force in Ghana. Government must find more permanent solutions to the erratic power supply problem in Ghana and consider reducing taxes on electric tariffs for fashion business growth. In all these challenges, government's involvement is essential.

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