

## **Ecological Design in Africa: Designers Take the Centre Stage**

*by Novell Zwangendaba*

As the world faces the real consequences of environmental degradation, conservation and ecological sustainability have become the focal points of global attention, and Africa fashion designers have joined their international counterparts in championing the green cause, with innovation and style.

Several international conferences are being held across the world to discuss and address serious environmental issues such as climate change, devastating earthquakes, simultaneous droughts and an alarming rise in world temperatures: some of the destructive results of changes in the ecosystem caused by humans' excessive damage to the environment. African designers are recognizable among today's pioneers of ecological action.

The seriousness of the need for ecological preservation has prompted the United Nations Trade Group to promote so-called "EcoChic Fashion" as one way of stemming the rapid loss of the world's biodiversity.

The United Nations has designated 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity, to focus attention on the threat of extinction of the fauna and flora on which the world depends for survival. The UN Conference on Trade and Development is calling for the sustainable use of natural resources. It says ecological fashion firms use organic materials and production methods that do not damage the environment.

In African design circles, plausible green initiatives are spreading like *veld*-fire, and these include efforts by the likes of Alphadi, the president of All-Africa Fashion Designers. Alphadi, who comes from Niger, and who founded the Festival of the Deserts, has also launched an environmental campaign to deal with these same ecological issues, through design creativity in the high fashion community. The design community is coming together to work towards environmental preservation and ethical consumerism, which has a particular focus on sustainable resources and alternatives such as recycling.

Alphadi, who has stores in New York, Paris and several African countries, who has an impressive list of clients that include the wives of African presidents, and who has designed clothes for US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the late singer Michael Jackson, says that promoting green fashion is both good for the environment and good for the "pocketbook". His eco-chic *couture* fashion costs several thousands of dollars and ready-to-wear costs several hundred dollars.

His recent collection at the second edition of the continent's biggest showcase, the Pan-African

Cultural Festival (PANAF 2009), which was held in Algeria, left the audience stunned by his design brilliance.

«That's me. Alphadi. Eco. Green and we make money. Make money for me and make money for my country. And to help Africa to grow and to give it a human face... Europeans make fashion. Why not Africa? Fashion can help Africa», he recently told the Voice of America.

South Africa's "Real Simple Green Innovation Awards", which were inaugurated in the year 2008, are also aimed at creating awareness of "green" products for the benefit of consumers. Past winners of the prestigious awards include Brett Kaplan, who won the Green Fashion Award for his Woolworths Green Label range of clothing made from 100% organic cotton. The range also includes bamboo shirts and socks.

At the 2008 "Re:Fashion Award", MADE got the Africa Award, for «recognising outstanding practices for bringing about change to people or environment in Africa». MADE is Topshop's gorgeous new collection of jewellery. It is ethically produced in Africa, using local materials and based on traditional designs. The jewellery is handmade to the client's specifications by artisans, using local resources such as precious metals and semi-precious stones, recycled glass, wood and bits of bone. The highly fashionable jewellery combines beads made of recycled glass and traditional Zulu beading. The money generated in international sales goes directly to the producers and a percentage is invested back into community projects and training. MADE pays the craftspeople a "living" wage; one that is up to three times higher than the minimum wage. Thus, a fashionable indulgence for a good cause.

Zimbabwe's unrivaled Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA) hosted the DesignFactory, which was produced by the very innovative *EthnoDesignProject*, featuring creations by the country's most progressive fashion designers experimenting with alternative and recycled materials. The youthful designers showcased eco-fashion and accessories made from unusual materials, such as monkey-ball shells, old vinyl records, expired credit cards, network cable off-cuts, used recharge telecom cards, waste billboard banners and scrap materials. Collaborating in the same project, visiting South African emerging designer, Reg Zavick, of the label Super Dog, added his skill to the spectacle of green fashion with his recycling of old and reject clothes.

Ugandan fashion designer Sylvia Owori teamed up with Southern Range to design and produce an all-organic cotton fashion line for both women and men. Some of her fabulous designs were showcased at *Brand Africa*, an initiative that seeks to promote and market the continent's organic products to the world, and to develop strategies aimed at increasing Africa's competitiveness in the organic cotton industry.

The ecological wave is sweeping across East Africa, where the brand “Made in Africa”, which has made a mark on the international fashion scene, has become an exclusive product of A QUESTION OF, a company selling organic merchandise and fair trade fashion T-shirts produced in Tanzania. The T-shirts are made according to eco-design principles under sustainable working conditions, and the employees receive fair wages.

There is a preoccupation with the environment in the production chain, and the company says on its homepage that «organic cotton is not only an environmentally friendly solution, it also provides healthier working conditions and is a more valuable market opportunity for farmers in Africa. Organic cotton is grown without synthetic chemical fertilizers or pesticides. All T-shirts from A QUESTION OF are made of organic African cotton certified under the Global Organic Textile Standards (GOTS), which is a certification mark aimed at ensuring high quality on our organic cotton, in combination with insuring good working conditions for the textile workers.»

Preservation and ecological sustainability are two of the most important environmental actions today. Even Vivienne Westwood, who is quite firm about her belief that fashion is not an art because it is ephemeral, could not avoid creating good pieces of fashionable art using recyclable materials.

Novell Zwangendaba is a Zimbabwean-born artist, whose writings have graced several publications including *OpenDemocracy*, *JIVE Magazine* and the banned *Daily News*. He writes for various publications such as *The Zimbabwean*, *Nordic Africa News*, *Zimgreats*, *Artists Initiates*, *AllVoices* and *OpenDemocracy*, among others. Zwangendaba founded the *EthnoDesignProject* in 2005 and in 2007 this project won the “Global Young Social Entrepreneurship Award”. It was also short-listed for “Innovator of the Year 2008”, and was selected as one of the Top 10 in the “YSEI Awards”. Zwangendaba is the former founding director of the design label BlackScissors, and has been actively involved in the design industry since 1997. He has designed for commissioned projects, television shows, theatre productions, documentaries and films, renowned personalities and prominent organisations in Zimbabwe and beyond. Last year he became one of the few designers to be selected to participate in the biggest African showcase, the Pan-African Cultural Festival, held in Algeria