

African fashion shows its roots

Traditional Sierra Leone prints worn by ex-slaves and Nigeria's colourful ankara cloth embellished with sequins and flowing European silk made a potent combination on the Lagos catwalk this weekend.

Hundreds of Nigeria's fashionistas crammed two huge tents for the city's debut Fashion Week, modelled on the Paris or New York events, which brought together more than 50 vibrant African designers.

On show were modern twists to Nigeria's ankara and hand-woven aso-oke, home-grown Sierra Leone cottons once worn by freed slaves returning home, and Masai prints from Kenya matched with Ghanaian kente.

Nigerian designer Kemmy Solomon took aso-oke, which with ankara is a feature at all ceremonies, from weddings to funerals, of the Yoruba tribe, and came up with a stunning collection, including a modern crop jacket worn with a short, gypsy-like skirt.

Working with the decades-old fabric is "kind of going back to my roots," said Solomon, of KemKem Studios, who boasts of a vintage collection of aso-oke, some as old as 60 years.

Infusion adds a touch of glamour

Her infusion of the durable asoke with silks, laces and cottons created a look of elegant glamour at the three-day, organised by London-based Arise Magazine, which ended late Sunday.

Lagos-based Ituen Basi meanwhile presented a cruise collection of patch worked dresses made from plain coloured aso-oke and showcased by crash-helmeted models.

London-based Hazel Aggrey-Orleans works ankara prints on silk to create stunning maxi dresses.

"I see the African side of me being the ankara print and the Western side of me being the silk," said Aggrey-Orleans, born in Germany and raised in Nigeria.

Nkwo Onwuka, also based in London, is influenced by Kenya's nomadic Masai tribe and presented jackets made with Ghanaian kente fabric but with Masai blanket prints.

"Africa is in now. People are taking notice of us and it's great time to be African," said Onwuka Sunday after presenting a collection that included Masai plate-like necklaces made from woven ankara strips.

Rebranding Sierra Leone

Sierra Leonean Mary-ann Kaikai, showcasing for the first time outside her impoverished and war-scarred country, wowed the crowd with brightly coloured and fancily cut short dresses made with a home-grown cotton striped fabric.

The cloth was originally woven by slaves freed from Britain and the United States who returned to settle in Freetown.

"The war ended 10 years ago and one of the things we are trying to do is rebrand the country. I am part of the re-branding image of Sierra Leone," said the 25-year-old designer.

Knitwear designer Buki Akib took the audience down the nostalgic journey of Nigeria's music, showcasing multi-coloured high-waisted men's trousers and knitted swimming trunks, inspired by afrobeat legend Fela Kuti.

The show underscored the growing influence of African culture and prints, previously not so well recognised in Western designs.

"Now the trend in Europe is bold prints, bold colours and statement jewellery, which is something we normally do in Africa," said Paris-based fashion stylist Crystal Deroche.

Arise editor Helen Jennings was impressed with the innovation.

"These designers are actually turning indigenous fabrics into something very contemporary and modern, I think it's great. It's only natural, it's what surrounds (them)," she said.

Source: *AFP*

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