2016

Kanga Textile Design, Education, and Production in contemporary Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

MacKenzie Moon Ryan PhD.
mmyranda@rollins.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf

Part of the Art and Materials Conservation Commons, Art Practice Commons, Fashion Design Commons, Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the Museum Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1002

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
While today kanga textiles are commonly thought of as bearers of east African or Swahili culture, this industrially produced textile emerged from a complex history of global trade networks serving local consumer demands. Worn widely throughout the east African region, this textile emerged as a fashionable garment preferred by women along the Swahili Coast of east Africa in the late nineteenth century. Shortly after its introduction in 1886, these inexpensive printed textiles became favored consumer goods throughout the wider region, stretching from present-day southern Somalia, throughout Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Malawi, and into eastern DRC and northern Mozambique. (Closely related cloths were even adopted in the Comoros Islands and Madagascar).

Known as kanga in Tanzania and leso in Kenya, these textiles display colorful, graphic designs and are most often worn by women as wrapper. These textiles are ubiquitous throughout the east African region, as staple items of women’s attire and household use. Kanga textiles are the first thing a newborn baby is wrapped in and the last thing a deceased woman or child is shrouded in. They protect adolescent girls while undergoing initiation ceremonies and are given to brides at kitchen parties to celebrate their upcoming weddings. Kanga textiles gained increased international fame when an Obama kanga design was produced upon the president’s election in 2008 and a second commemorative Obama kanga was produced in summer 2013 to mark the American president’s visit to Tanzania.

Kanga textiles are sold in pairs, and as mass-produced, industrially printed textiles, they have retained adherence to a standard composition: a central graphic image, called mji in Swahili, or town; surrounded by a wide, continuous border, or pindo, completed by a Swahili phrase, called jina or name.
Swahili phrases often reproduce familiar proverbs, provincial wisdom, benevolent blessings, and at times, defensive warnings. Some women use these phrases to communicate with family members, friends, and rivals. Designs range from decorative floral motifs, repeating geometric designs, to everyday objects and desirable commodities. Women carefully select each pair of kanga textiles for their applicability in saying, desirable motif, flattering color combination, and quality of material and printing.

This paper seeks to answer the questions: How have kanga textiles been designed throughout the past? How are kanga designers educated today? What new demands are contributing to contemporary kanga production?

During the colonial era, kanga were designed on the specification of expert locals but manufactured abroad and functioned largely as imported commodities. From ca. 1880s to the late 1960s, manufacturers first in Europe and subsequently in Asia industrially wove cloth and printed designs to create kanga. Shippers handled transport from place of manufacture to Swahili coastal port cities, where wholesalers and retailers received the finished textiles. Distributors in the form of merchant-converter firms or trading houses managed all of this coordination—they commissioned new textiles for sale and distributed the final product to sellers in east Africa. They did so upon the specialty knowledge, advice, and skills of experts in Swahili coastal port cities: resident Indian merchants, who knew how to meet the ever-changing demands of kanga cloth consumers, east African women.
European and subsequently Asian merchant-converter firms hired resident Indian representatives, sellers, and designers during the colonial era. Kassamali Gulamhussein (K. G.) Peera (b. 1911/12 – d. 2011) is one example of a kanga designer and seller active in Zanzibar and Dar es Salaam; he canvased east African women’s tastes, created new kanga designs, and finally sold the finished product within his family’s business. Resident Indian merchants provided the crucial linchpin between east African consumers and European then Asian manufacturers and distributors; they placed orders for, designed, and sold new kanga, relying on their intimate knowledge of market tastes.

New domestic factories were founded during the independence era, beginning with Tanganyika’s declaration of independence in 1961 and its subsequent union with Zanzibar to form Tanzania in 1964. In 1967, Tanzania began pursuing a socialized system of self-reliance, called Ujamaa, and established protectionist policies to support the fledgling domestic textile industry. For example, Urafiki or Friendship Textile Mill was a joint investment between newly independent Tanzania and socialist China in the late 1960s.
Since then, cotton cultivation, cloth production and textile design have coalesced in the port city and financial hub of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, though other factories exist in regional cities. Textile factories processed cotton, spun thread, and wove plain-weave cloth, in addition to bleaching, washing, and mercerizing. Copper plates then rotary screens printed designs to suit the local market, and freshly printed designs are heated to ensure colorfast quality. Uncut kanga cloth are piled in bales awaiting cutting, baling, and packaging for shipping.

With an emphasis on self-reliance, new nationalized vertically integrated textile mills were responsible for generating new designs in-house. Archival photos and interviews suggest that East African men and women in collaboration with Chinese designers were responsible for new designs. An example of an independence-era designer is Professor Hashim A. Nakanoga, who was employed by Urafiki for nine years from 1971-1980 as a textile surface designer. Trained in Fine Arts from Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, he received a Diploma in Textile Design in 1982 from the Scottish College of Textiles in Edinburgh. He served as professor of art at the University of Dar es Salaam from 1979-2007. He was part of a celebratory generation of designers where most everything reflected Tanzania, national pride, and self-reliance. He continues to take on special kanga commissions, such as the one here that celebrates the University of Dar es Salaam’s 50th anniversary in 2011.
When I visited *Urafiki* in October 2011, I was able to briefly view their *kanga* swatch storage and pattern archive, which documents almost fifty years of *Urafiki* production.
At the same time of my site visits, the jointly owned and operated Chinese-Tanzania Friendship Textile mill was actively seeking a private investor to buy the majority share. To that end, *Urafiki* installed a *kanga* showroom to display their products professionally. In December 2011, ownership transferred to a private Chinese company, and I was no longer able to gain access to the mill, pattern archive, or showroom.

Though *Urafiki* has remained in production for fifty years, Tanzania’s socialist policies which continued into the 1980s almost spelled the end of the domestic textile industry. By 1985, the government adopted liberalizing economic policies and opened its borders to imports. In this new era, domestic textile mills had to compete with imports primarily from India and China. Cost-cutting measures at local firms meant that designers were now freelance artists, who sold their designs to all major textile manufacturers, both home and abroad. Mr. Furahi Kasika, Jr. is an example of a liberalizing-era designer. He described himself as self-taught and under-employed by *Urafiki* in 1990s and 2000s, and still hand-draws and paints his designs and sells them to the highest bidder.
Kanga design has again changed in response to the digital world, where in the contemporary era, designers use computer-generated patterns to create new kanga designs rapidly. Mr. Vijay Patankar is an example of a contemporary designer—employed by Afritex, a subsidiary of Mohammed Enterprises Ltd (MeTL), he has taken a course in computer-generated pattern design in India. He immigrated to Dar es Salaam for employment, and he both digitizes hand-drawings purchased from other designers and creates his own digital designs direct for printing.
The textile industry in Tanzania today is poised for a major shift. With 80% of all cotton grown in Tanzania currently exported and a looming ban on secondhand clothing slated to take effect in 2019, the government is again focused on supporting local production, manufacturing, and consumption. With imported kanga currently undercutting those locally produced, and because domestic firms are increasingly foreign-owned and operated, one question has been on the minds of Tanzanian educators, development agents, and politicians: How can kanga textiles be reclaimed for Tanzania?

Today, educators are making a concerted effort to train textile professionals at university, technical, and specialist institutions to support and sustain a prosperous textile sector. Institutions in and beyond Dar es Salaam are creating educational programs to train the next generation of Tanzanian textile experts. They are investing in human capital to avoid increasing reliance on foreign expertise. Training includes textile engineering, or the processing of local cotton into woven cloth, textile technologies, the design of woven and knitted patterns, thread count, and a fabric’s properties, textile surface design, the creation of surface patterns to be printed on cloth, and finally fashion design, creating desirable clothing for both local and international consumption.

The University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) offers a BS in Textile Engineering and BS in Textile Design and Technology within the College of Engineering and Technology (CoET). Their express desire to provide skilled experts to manage and run vertically integrated textile factories in Tanzania. These degrees were launched in 2011-2012 with assistance from the Gatsby Charitable Foundation and Trust. To formally train textile surface designers, the University of Dar es Salaam also offers a BA in Fine and Performing Arts, which teaches textile surface design as part of its three-year course and focuses on kanga design, under the direction of Professors Elias Jengo and Hashim A. Nakanoga. The Institute of Arts and Culture Bagamoyo, 40 miles north of Dar es Salaam, offers a diploma in arts and teaches three courses in textile surface design, where kanga functions as a core subject.

Beyond textile engineering, technology, and surface design, the Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA) offers a two-year diploma in Textile and Fashion Design in Dar es Salaam. This technical school has hired retired University of Dar es Salaam Professors Nakanoga and Jengo as consultants to advise of complimentary courses. Students learn sewing, weaving, knitting techniques, pattern making, as well as drawing, painting, and design. A unique feature of this program offers students a placement or internship in vertically integrated factories; there, they receive on-the-job training to aid in the creation of desirable textiles and garments. This program serves as a bridge to the growing fashion sector in Tanzania—which includes fashion designers, photographers, models, stylists, journalists, and production teams. These “catwalk fashions” cater to an elite minority but also re-established locally produced kanga cloth and clothing as fashionable. These catwalk styles are aspirational to the vast majority of Tanzanians, but set the stage for a renewed interest in kanga cloth by young, urban professionals.

2 Professor Leonard Mwaikambo, Coordinator of Faculty, interview 27 October 2011.
3 The Textile Engineering course welcomed an inaugural class of 12 and the Textile Design and Technology course welcomed 19; each had a goal of 15 students each.
Perhaps the most visible annual promotion and celebration of Tanzanian fashion comes in the form of Swahili Fashion Week, which has been held annually in Dar es Salaam since 2007. A brief introduction to three Tanzanian fashion designers—all of whom use kanga as their primary source material—will demonstrate how the fashion sector has expanded in the last decade. Kemi Kalikawe founded Naledi Fashion House in 2008 and regularly launches new collections at Swahili Fashion Week. While she continues to design, she also launched the non-profit Naledi Fashion Institute in 2013 to help train and apprentice young designers. She has worked with organizations such as Alliance Française, British Council, Goethe Institute, and the Tanzanian Gatsby Trust, but founded this fashion incubator to provide a consistent, reliable and homegrown point of entry for young designers to gain knowledge, skills, and the network to effectively contribute to the burgeoning Tanzanian fashion industry.

Similarly, Shellina Ebrahim began as a fashion design in 2008, showing collections at multiple Swahili Fashion Weeks. In 2013 she founded Tanzania’s Fashion & Style Magazine, or FAS. As editor-in-chief of this digital magazine (though now available in print), Shellina’s entrepreneurial venture gives testament to the growing professionalization of fashion industry in Tanzania. Her magazine employs models, photographers, stylists, journalists, and production teams to realize their content. Based in Dar es Salaam, FAS often features events and celebrities from the city and uses the streets as backdrop for editorial shoots and reaches a digital readership in excess of 50,000.

Some fashion designers have garnered success both within and beyond Tanzania. Christine Mhando established the clothing line, Chichia in 2007 and by 2010 had gained fame within Tanzania. In 2013, her London-based clothing line gained international celebrity when none other than Beyoncé wore one of her tops while on tour. Through this simple selection, Beyoncé introduced Chichia—and kanga—to a worldwide audience.

Still other designers beyond Tanzania use kanga as their starting point and have raised the profile of this otherwise humble everyday cloth to an international market. Trends in global and ethical fashion have informed clothing lines such as LaLesso. Founded in 2005 by Olivia Kennaway and Alice Heusser, LaLesso serves wealthy, conscientious women clients by way Spring/Summer and Resort collections annually, and enjoys stockists around the world. LaLesso is committed to “transparent, sustainable, eco and ethical production facilities” in their home countries of Kenya and South Africa, and use kanga patterns in the majority of their designs.

Similarly, Suno is an clothing line founded by Max Osterweis of New York in 2008. Inspired by kanga on a trip to Kenya, early collections relied substantially on kanga cloth. Priding itself on its social responsibility, Suno also serves high-end women clients around the world and have even dressed Michelle Obama on several occasions.

In conclusion, I’d like to return to the questions I initially posed: How have kanga textiles been designed throughout the past?

---

In the colonial-era, *kanga* were designed on the advice of resident Indian designers and sellers in communication with textile printers abroad. In the independence-era, *kanga* were hand-drawn and painted by employees at domestic textile factories. In the liberalizing-era, *kanga* were hand-drawn and painted by freelance artists. In the contemporary-era, *kanga* were designed digitally by trained employees at textile factories, mostly foreign-owned and operated.

Secondly, how are *kanga* designers educated today?

Via BS degrees in textile engineering, BS degrees in textile technologies, BA and diplomas in textile surface design, and certificates in textile and fashion design.

Finally, what new demands are contributing to contemporary *kanga* production?

Through fashion catwalk shows, fashion institutes and apprenticeships, fashion publishing, and fashion clothing lines.

Drawing on *kanga* designs, textiles and clothing; experience with the contemporary Dar es Salaam fashion industry; recent interviews with educators and designers; and field and archival research; this paper argues that *kanga* cloth is at the center of educational, production, manufacturing, and employment efforts in contemporary Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.