

Subversive Styles: Fashion As An Unlikely Space For Kenyan Transgression

2011

My relationship with second-hand clothing a while back was very intense. By 2011, I knew the second hand Gikomba clothes market in Nairobi like the back of my hand. You could blindfold me, put me anywhere in the market and I would know exactly where I was. I knew most of the vendors by name, and—despite my severe allergies—still got an amazing rush rummaging through piles and piles of clothes, because I would find the most incredible pieces. As I sorted through mountains of shirts—each costing Ksh50—my parameters for making decisions changed; at that price, it's not really about cost any more, as it so often is with racks of new, ready-to-wear clothing.

I would pick a shirt for particular reasons—not for its colour, but the buttons, or how the sleeves fit. It is here that I began to find myself stylistically. These open-air stalls were far more accepting of my curiosity than the air-conditioned boutiques we had in the few shopping malls in Nairobi back then. These stalls have been—and still remain to a large extent—the places where most of Nairobi's and indeed Kenya's fashion trends begin. It was here that new trends popped up first. If cigarette pants were in, the second-hand stalls would ride that wave way before any retail outlets in Nairobi did. The people who wore mitumba (used clothes) were actually the most fashion-forward in the city. Mitumba vendors led these trends, because they always had first access to the best piles. I found amazing treasures there, like a black Calvin Klein overcoat, and a fur stole.

With my friend Jim Chuchu, I started a project called Stingo—an old Kenyan slang word for 'style' or 'mode'. The general idea with Stingo was to organize regular photo shoots around any ideas we wanted to explore as a group. Jim also called up some other friends: producer Lucille Kahara and makeup artist Kangai Mwiti. I was the designated fashion stylist. Since there was no budget for shopping, every piece we used was mine: 'stylist's own'. I had to cheat by casting models who were my size. We put out the images resulting from the shoots on the project

website and on Facebook—this was in the pre-Instagram age—and the response was wonderful. There was such excitement around the idea of a group of Kenyans coming together to create such images. We kept shooting every fortnight or so.

However, visiting Gikomba market became tedious—I now noticed the flaws in the second-hand clothes: a small hole from an iron burn, a frayed hem. While I could erase or hide these in the final image, I was no longer satisfied with just being able to put together a look. I was becoming interested in the story behind the garments. This made us wonder: was Stingo a design agency, a modeling agency or an online magazine? Beyond composing, styling and publishing beautiful images, could we do more to feature local design, and help address some of the challenges faced by the designers around us? I stopped sourcing clothes for the Stingo shoots from secondhand markets, and began to dress models in original pieces that had been locally designed and produced.

Going Local

One of the first local designers we featured was Sheila Amolo. I had met her at a small backstreet fashion show and I thought her clothes were stunning. I remember this one jacket she had made—it had beautiful peplum detail at the waist, long before such waistlines were trendy. I fell in love with it immediately.

We were overwhelmed by the response from our fast-growing audience: some wanted to collaborate with us, many wanted to model for the shoots, and others were excited to discover the very cool, new fashion designers we featured such as Blackbird and Blackfly, interested in buying their clothes. The requests by aspiring models were by far the most. Those we had already shot became incredibly popular online and were soon able to access a kind of instant celebrity status, based purely on these campaigns.

We continued to work with more designers, such as Kepha Maina. My interactions with him and other designers gave me a lot of insight into the fashion value chain in Kenya. I witnessed the development of garments from a concept to a toile, and eventually into a collection. The design process captured me: the time and effort the designers spent obsessing over the exact line of a collar or where to place a seam. It also began to bother me that I was working to create visual narratives and stories about my contemporary Kenyan fashion experience, but was not wearing clothes from local designers. After the shoots, I would fold the pieces

neatly and hand them back to the designers. I gradually changed my wardrobe, moving away from affordable thrifted gems to pieces that had been designed and made by Kenyans.

2012

By this point, the Stingo team had become very busy with other projects.

Kangai had started her own beauty channel, Lucille went to culinary school, and I was out of school and working full-time at a boutique hotel in the city, and Jim had partnered with our friend George Gachara on what eventually became the multidisciplinary space we call The Nest.

From the many interactions and conversations we had with designers, we realized that many fashion designers were really struggling with the distribution of their clothes. Since most of them did not have retail spaces and often worked from home, we sought to find a solution that was effective and that would not cost much. Jim, George and I designed an online retail experiment and called it Chico Leco. We stocked a funky, edgy collection; a mix of locally designed accessories with some one-of-a-kind vintage pieces. We preferred accessories because they were easier to obtain— and we didn't have to figure out sizing. Because of this, they were a lot easier to sell.

We put together a selection of ankara button earrings from Otenge, ankara bow-ties from Anyango Mpinga and some feather earrings from Bizzy Lizzy. We later added a few retro sunglasses I picked up from a really old optometrist's store in Ngara neighbourhood in Nairobi that stocked amazing vintage frames from the 60's and 70's. We also got a few brooches from an obscure antique store that stocked delightfully elaborate costume jewellery. Brooches are usually a thing that only older people wear, which is such a shame because they are so beautiful and such an easy way to accessorise.

We put everything in place, including figuring out mobile payment options and delivery solutions. When the website went live, we were so excited the moment someone actually bought a pair of ankara button earrings! Chico Leco was soon receiving many orders and we were fast learning how fashion retail business worked. Soon, we gained some courage and began selling clothing. We stocked some cigarette pants from Kepha Maina in black and cobalt. We carried cropped pants with ankara roll-up detail from Nick Ondu, and some crop-tops from

Katungulu Mwendwa. Jim and George ran the store in between their day jobs, and I—with any minute I could spare from my full-time job—curated the catalogue.

Since the early Stingo days, we had been disappointed by the rather uninspired safeness of the fashion images that had populated the mainstream until then: nothing was really fresh, new or exciting. Our editorials therefore had a rather sexual charge, ranging from coy and flirtatious to unashamedly risqué. We were exploring our adult freedoms and stretching them to shameless limits—‘manufacturing desire’, we called it. We became increasingly aware of how powerful images could be, and the clear space for considered image composition in the marketing of fashion.

Chico Leco was the first of its kind at the time, establishing an online Kenyan retail space in the early days when e-commerce here was such an experiment. However, most of our customers still preferred to see, touch and fit the clothes—just like they would in a physical store—before making a payment. As a result, our sales were mostly the accessories and other one-size items. Realising this, we widened our selection with leather laptop sleeves and clutch bags from Rift Valley Leather and clutches from Adèle Dejak. We also commissioned wool snoods—in black, white and cobalt—from a local women’s group.

We encountered many of the problems faced by young brands: effective pricing, packaging, managing overheads and logistics, ensuring a consistent supply of high quality products, as well as finding enough storage space for all our wares, which we had to move between our homes. We would have liked to expand our product catalogue, but we had limited working capital and would strain our cash flow trying to buy stock upfront. We were also aware that the consignment model was not sustainable for the young brands we were stocking. After about a year of operations, these persistent challenges led us to the decision to take a break from the retail part of our experiment in order to figure out a better way to grow the designers and their product, as well as the fashion value chain.

2013

In 2012, I left my job at the hotel to join The Nest with Jim and George, and we absorbed Chico Leco into The Nest as a program. We learned that fashion presentation was a recurring frustration for the numerous designers we were in conversations with. Many of them were growing disenfranchised with the model

of fashion shows, as they are understood in Kenya. Designers are routinely asked to pay a fee to be included in the vast majority of shows, and these fees were often quite high—out of reach for many young designers, and without the certainty of any tangible returns or brand growth. The shows seemed to only benefit the event organisers, who would treat the runway as entertainment alongside dance and other performances.

Photographers covering these events were also not aware of the specific needs of fashion imaging, and would often shoot only the faces of the models, leaving out the clothes. Video coverage of these shows tended to focus on the general event. Therefore there was nothing that the designers could use for their own marketing after the show. We decided to use Chico Leco to address this, and our first project was a film project we called Chico Leco Presents. We called up some of the designers we had interacted with since the Stingo days and commissioned collections from them. In this project we carried collections from Katungulu Mwendwa, Sydney Owino and Zeddie Loky (Blackbird), Ruth Abade (Blackfly), Sheila Amolo, Kepha Maina, Wambui Mukenyi and Nick Ondu. I also challenged myself to create a collection alongside the others. I had dabbled in design since high school and through university, sporadically conceptualising and producing garments for myself, but never executing more than a few pieces at a time.

Referencing my multicultural background, I created a cross-seasonal menswear collection called Sun Seeker. It was an exploration of structures: fitted blazers worked in a variety of plaid suiting, slowly moving towards more relaxed silhouettes emphasised in light, richly coloured cottons. Working with a producer, a makeup artist and several models, the Nest team conceptualised and created short fashion films for each collection. We challenged ourselves to shoot eight videos in one location in a day and actually pulled it off!

We also wrote all the press releases that accompanied the fashion films. This was a necessary exercise in storytelling, designed to shift local fashion journalism from the use of vague adjectives such as ‘nice’, ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’, and make stronger reference to the technical and design elements of the collections. We put the videos out on YouTube, and the result was very exciting. We got unprecedented press coverage— with much better language because they quoted and expanded on our press releases—and generated a much larger audience than even the biggest local fashion show could offer. Two of the short films in the project—Dinka Translation and Urban Hunter—screened in festivals such as the

Fashion and Film showcase at the Guggenheim, and art shows in other countries. This confirmed to us that there existed far more effective tools for fashion presentation than were being used locally.

2015

In 2015, we decided to have a go at another audiovisual fashion showcase, and this time we challenged ourselves and our designers to develop elements around an original narrative. We developed a short fiction script titled *To Catch A Dream*, then commissioned the designers Kepha Maina, Katungulu Mwendwa, Namnyak Odupoy, Ami Doshi Shah, Jamil Walji and Azra Walji to create pieces that would benefit the fictional characters as described in the script. We also got additional complementary pieces from Ann McCreath and Adèle Dejak. It took about four months for the designers to develop concepts for the film, and produce finished pieces. After that, there were a few more months for pre-production, and four intense days of shooting in four different locations. We were incredibly privileged to have Ajuma Nasenyana play our lead character.

The resulting film allowed us to instigate conversations around the ability of Africans to access fantasy narratives in mainstream media, and ask many other questions beyond both fashion and film—particularly on the use of African languages in film (the film utilized six indigenous languages). *To Catch A Dream* went on to screen at numerous fashion and film festivals, and even won the Best Original Music award at the Berlin International Fashion Film Festival.

2016-

Many things have evolved in the local fashion industry since my early Gikomba days, when designer shop fronts were sparse, and local ones even fewer.

With a rise in cultural pride, Kenyan fashion is gaining visibility within the region, expanding possibilities for successful production and retail of local designs. There is a thriving industry in fashion support—bloggers, influencers and stylists; models who are becoming recognisable brand names; fashion photographers; overlaps between fashion, beauty, lifestyle and wellness; specialised fashion PR, etc. Conversations with government are also much more productive. They have become more open to the sector's huge economic potential especially regarding job creation, and are figuring out how to chip in through policy reforms, as well as manufacturing and import subsidies.

Far beyond the commercial viability of the sector, I believe that fashion remains one of the most complex languages of human expression. It is capable of multidimensional communication by both the designer and the consumer, superseding seasons and trends. I have curated wardrobes for movies and TV series, as well as various design showcases and museum exhibitions, but in many ways, I remain a student of style, always rediscovering the immense power clothing and dress practice has to alter people's moods, attitudes, the quality of their interactions and their experiences of their surroundings.

It is amazing to be part of expanding the collective imagination, as well as my own, with regard to how human beings occupy public space. With every new project I lead or am involved in, I am continually fascinated by and careful to harness the power of garments and their combinations to appease, honour, protest, subvert and transgress.

As part of [The Nest Collective](#), we have continued to ask cultural questions through fashion. We have put together these ideas and images from a selection of emerging Kenyan designers who are contributing to the shifting aesthetic of our country. In this interrogation of what exactly qualifies as 'authentically African', we challenge narrow definitions of African design and showcase original, unencumbered thinking and practice in this challenging sphere. Not African Enough was our translation of a voyage into Kenyan contemporary fashion as an exploration of wider issues regarding Africa's place in global cultural debates and dialogues.