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# Fashioning the Future

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# Fashioning the future: Entrepreneuring in Africa's emerging fashion industry

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# Fashioning the future:
# Entrepreneuring in Africa's emerging fashion industry

*A vibrant fashion scene is emerging in Africa, spearheaded by a new generation of young fashion designers. Drawing on a multi-sited study of Ghanaian, Ugandan and Zambian female designers, this article examines the emerging fashion industry as a site for entrepreneuring where people's aspirations to bring about personal, cultural and socio-economic development converge. The paper reveals how fashion designers envision their endeavours as pathways for pursuing their passion, for changing the associations ascribed to 'Africanness', and for revitalising failing clothing industries. The paper proposes that while the emerging character of the industry creates uncertainty and many obstacles for running viable businesses, fashion designers remain enthused by narratives about the industry's future prospects.*

## Introduction

A dynamic fashion industry is said to be emerging in Africa, which has been described as 'fashion's new frontier' (Jennings, 2011). A small group of established African fashion designers is being succeeded by 'a new wave of young designers', and fashion weeks, fashion magazines, and fashion schools are blossoming around cities in Africa. The rise of African fashion design has caught the attention of international fashion magazines and creative commentators, who are hailing Africa as a new global locus for creativity. Recent years have also seen increased policy attention to, and academic interest in, the role played by creativity in fostering economic development. This interest has been attributed to the fact that on the global market, culture and creativity - embodied in tradable products - are increasingly valued both as tools for economic development and for their cultural value (Barrowclough and Kozul-Wright, 2008; UNCHAD, 2008; 2010; 2013). UNCHAD (2010, p. 1), for example, states that the creative economy can 'foster income generation, job creation and export earnings while promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development'. This development potential is clear from the global value of the creative industry, which is estimated to amount to seven percent of world gross domestic product (UNCHAD, 2010). Shares of this global market are, however, distributed unevenly and Africa's share of the global trade of creative products in particular remains marginal (UNCHAD, 2008).

Entrepreneurs are seen as key actors in realising the potential of Africa's creative industries. Increasingly, the notion of the 'cultural' or 'creative' entrepreneur is gaining ground to describe the actors who transform culture and creativity into tradable products or services (UNCHAD, 2010). However, there is still limited knowledge about the motives, practices and accomplishments of the entrepreneurs engaged in Africa's creative economy. This paper seeks to

address this gap by examining the socio-economic and cultural dynamics at play in the emerging fashion industry. Drawing on field research carried out with young female fashion designers in Ghana, Uganda and Zambia the paper explores the opportunities that the new generation of designers are seizing, examines their motives for engaging in fashion, and scrutinizes how they cope with the uncertainties, tensions and challenges stemming from the emerging creative industry context. The paper starts by reviewing the existing literature on entrepreneurship in the creative industries and the development debate before presenting the key concepts of *entrepreneuring* and *fictional expectations*. After outlining the methodology and research setting, the focus then turns to African fashion designers where the findings reveal how the designers' entrepreneuring is motivated by aspirations of pursuing their passion for fashion, creating transcultural designs, and revitalising the textile industry. The paper makes important contributions to our understanding of entrepreneurship in emerging creative industries by revealing how entrepreneuring is tightly interwoven in the personal, cultural and socio-economic domains, and how aspirational narratives about personal fulfilment and creating societal change are enthusing entrepreneurs who operate in a highly challenging and uncertain market with limited institutional support.

## Creativity, entrepreneurship and development

Definitions of 'creative industries' abound, with commentators providing different suggestions as to what constitute the creative industries, many of which overlap with definitions of 'cultural industries' and the 'creative economy'. However, the concept generally embraces industries that lie at the crossroads of the arts, culture, technology and businesses that deal with the production and distribution of creative content. These include industries such as advertising, architecture, the

art and antiques market, crafts, design, fashion design, film, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software, television and radio (Flew, 2013).

During the last two decades the presence of creative industries and the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002) has been hailed as a new way of generating economic growth in western societies. Florida's proposition that the presence of the creative class spurs an open, dynamic, and professional urban environment, which in turn attracts more creative people, as well as businesses and capital, has been highly influential especially for urban planning. Some critics, however, have questioned the extent to which the presence of a creative class in itself contributes to urban development (Glaeser, 2005) while others have pointed to the insecure and precarious working conditions that characterise creative labour markets (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010).

Debates about the creative industries first emerged in Western societies. The global South, including Africa, has largely been excluded both from policy discussions and academic debates about the creative industries (though see Barrowclough and Kozul-Wright, 2008 and UNCHAD, 2008; 2010; 2013) even though, as was recently highlighted, 'many of the most important developments in the creative industries are now happening outside of Europe and North America' (Flew, p. vii). In the development debate, the idea of the creative economy has only recently begun to gain momentum, notably in connection with the notion that economic and cultural development are not separate entities and that there is untapped potential in creative industries. In the words of UNCHAD (2010, p. 1):

> 'The idea of the creative economy in the developing world draws attention to the significant creative assets and rich cultural resources that exist in all developing countries. The creative industries that use these resources not only enable countries to tell their own stories and to project their own unique cultural identities to themselves and to the world but they also provide these countries with a source of economic growth, employment creation and increased participation in the global economy'.

Still, the question of how far the potential benefits of the creative industry have actually materialised in Africa remains largely unexplored. Some attention has been paid to specific creative industries in Africa, such as the film industries in Nigeria (Laboto, 2010) and Burkina Faso (De Turégano, 2008), and the music industries in Ghana (Shipley, 2013) and Senegal (Pratt, 2008), and there is a growing literature on dress and fashion in Africa (see for example, Allman, 2004; Gott and Loghran, 2010; Hansen, 2013). But the role of entrepreneurship in the fashion industry in Africa has so far been little studied, even though entrepreneurship is increasingly being recognised in the wider development debate as part of a broader focus on the role of the private sector and entrepreneurs in development (Hansen and Schaumburg-Müller, 2010; Minniti and Naudé, 2010).

Definitions and approaches abound, but it is often claimed that the study of entrepreneurship is about the nexus where enterprising individuals and lucrative opportunities meet (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). The study of entrepreneurship has its origins in economics, and historically there has been a strong tendency to study entrepreneurship in terms of economic opportunities, rationalities and economic change (Steyaert and Katz, 2004). Moreover, the study

of entrepreneurship is often limited to an elite group of (male) entrepreneurs residing in the global North. As McRobbie (2013, p. 994) notes, there has been a tendency to associate entrepreneurship 'with an elite, pro-business, individualistic and indeed neo-liberal outlook'. In recent years, however, there has been a broadening of the domains and spaces of entrepreneurship.

In developing countries, the notion of 'necessity entrepreneurship' has become increasingly popular. In contrast to 'opportunity entrepreneurs', who are seen as being pulled by opportunities and a quest for independence, 'necessity entrepreneurs' are perceived as pushed by poverty and lacking alternative employment choices (Kelley et al., 2013; Langevang et al., 2012). Concerns have been raised that such survivalist entrepreneurs are unlikely to contribute to the structural transformations of developing countries (Gries and Naudé, 2010). Women, in particular, are increasingly being encouraged to become 'micro-entrepreneurs' by market-based initiatives to alleviate poverty such as microfinance and Base of the Pyramid (BoP) models. Critical studies, however, have pointed to the pitfalls of 'outsourcing development' to 'micro-entrepreneurs' indicating that such initiatives alone are unlikely to address the structural causes of poverty (Bateman and Chang, 2012; Dolan, 2014; Eversole, 2004). The individualistic focus of much entrepreneurship discourse is also increasingly being challenged by research that shows how the creation of new markets, institutions and organizations often is the result of collaborative and collective efforts (Montgomery et al., 2012).

Moreover, while conventional definitions of 'opportunity' focus on the potential for economic profit by looking at 'those situations in which new goods, services, raw materials, and organising

methods can be introduced and sold at greater than their cost of production' (Shane and Venkantaraman, 2000: 220), alternative definitions emphasise human, social and/or cultural achievements. Adopting a human development perspective, Gries and Naudé (2011, p. 217), for example, define opportunities as 'when persons can create new firms that will further the kind of lives they desire'. Similarly, the increasingly popular concept of social entrepreneurship is used to denote 'a process that catalyses social change and addresses important social needs in a way that is not dominated by direct financial benefits for the entrepreneurs' (Mair and Martí, 2006, p. 36). Similarly, the notion of creative entrepreneurship has emerged to describe the actors who are involved in transforming culture and creativity into tradable creative products or services (UNCHAD, 2010). Existing studies of entrepreneurship in the creative industries have used the terms 'cultural entrepreneur', 'creative entrepreneur ', 'culturpreneur' and 'art-entrepreneur' to capture 'the complex mix of creativity and commerce with which these individuals engage' (Scott, 2012, p. 242). Swedberg (2006: 260) defines cultural entrepreneurship as 'the carrying out of novel combinations that result in something new and appreciated in the cultural sphere'. These different conceptualisations suggest that ''cultural entrepreneurs' motivations cannot be reduced to economic interest' (Scott, 2012, p. 242). Establishing the boundaries between 'regular', 'social' and 'creative entrepreneurship' is, however, a tricky business.

With a view to widening the scope of what is considered 'entrepreneurial' and broadening the domains in which entrepreneurship is perceived as occurring, Steyeart and Katz (2004, p. 181) urged scholars to view entrepreneurship as 'a societal phenomenon rather than as a pure economic reality', suggesting a more complex view of entrepreneurship where 'the cultural, economic, spatial, relational and institutional become understood in their integrative effect'

(Steyeart and Katz, 2004, p. 189). To capture this complexity, the notion of 'entrepreneuring' (Steyaert, 2007; Rindova et al., 2009) is valuable. As a verb, 'entrepreneuring' emphasises that entrepreneurship is a process, and focuses on actions aimed at changing the status quo. Such change-making ambitions are manifested in 'efforts to bring about new economic, social, institutional, and cultural environments through the actions of an individual or group of individuals' and include various 'change-oriented activities and projects' aimed at creating something new: a new product, a new market, new opportunities for the individual and/or for other societal actors (Rindova et al., 2009, p. 477). It emphasises entrepreneurial agency by focusing on 'how wishes for autonomy, expression of personal values, and making a difference in the world can be accomplished' (Rindova et al. 2009, p. 477-478). Rindova et al. (2009) introduce the notion of 'entrepreneuring as emancipation', suggesting that entrepreneurial actions can empower individuals or groups to free themselves from their existing position within a power structure. Seeing entrepreneuring as emancipatory directs the gaze towards 'the factors that cause individuals to seek to disrupt the status quo and change their position in the social order in which they are embedded—and, on occasion, the social order itself' (Rindova, et al., 2009, p. 478).

This paper adopts the perspective of entrepreneuring to unravel fashion designers' efforts to concomitantly generate economic, social, cultural and personal change. In contrast to Rindova et al., however, I seek to study not only the emancipatory aspects of entrepreneuring but also the constraints, tensions and ambivalences involved in entrepreneuring in an emerging industry context. Emerging industries are typically characterised by uncertainty since the industry lacks established institutions and structures as well as standardised processes and lack of industrial legitimacy often becomes a source of ambiguity (Jansson, 2011). I use Beckert's (2013) concept of 'fictional expectations' to capture how the emerging character of the industry affects the

actions and motivations of entrepreneurs. Beckert (2013, p. 219) proposes that in situations of uncertainty when economic actors have limited foreknowledge and cannot accurately predict the future, and when there are limited institutions to regulate behaviour, they become 'motivated in their actions by the imagined future state and organise their activities based on these mental representations'. These mental representations are 'fictional expectations' which take the form of narratives or stories about future prospects. This article highlights links between entrepreneuring and fictional expectations, and uses designers' narratives to show how imagined futures of a flourishing fashion industry in Africa drive young women's entrepreneurship. Yet because the industry is still very much in the making, these women lack foreknowledge and the support of established institutions and collaboration, creating a situation of radical uncertainty, constraints and tensions. The paper proposes that in this context fictional expectations become key sources of creativity and motivation.

## Setting the scene

To understand the emergence of the African fashion design scene we must take account of the socioeconomic and cultural changes which have fuelled new opportunities for fashion designers, whilst taking care not to lose sight of existing forms of clothing innovation in the region. Many African countries have a rich tradition for textile and clothing production. In West Africa, for example, research has revealed the innovative practices of tailors and seamstresses who constantly transform products and adopt new materials, use various sources of inspiration and adapt styles to suit new tastes and set new trends (Gott, 2010; Langevang and Gough, 2012; Grabski, 2010). Yet although the production of clothing as a medium for creative expression and

income generation has a long history in Africa, according to Rovine (2010) past clothing innovations were not part of a 'self-conscious fashion market'. The distinction between other forms of clothing innovation and fashion design is not straight forward but fashion designers are typically trained in design techniques of Western origin and use sketches and patterns, many use labels, and their designs are often promoted through fashion shows, fashion weeks, magazines and the internet. Conversely, other forms of dressmaking are undertaken by tailors and seamstresses who are mostly trained through informal apprenticeships or vocational schools, use freehand cutting and rely predominantly on word of mouth to market their clothes (Langevang and Gough, 2012).

What has been termed 'the first generation of African fashion designers' (Rovine, 2010, Jennings, 2011) was constituted by a relatively small group of mainly Western trained African-based designers who were practising fashion at a time when African countries were still struggling for economic and cultural independence from colonial rule in the post-independence era. Drawing upon a long history of textile and clothing innovations, these designers used local fabrics and dress practices to express their pride in African national cultures (Rovine, 2010). Today's generation of fashion designers are building on their achievements while also taking advantage of new opportunities and promoting new transcultural styles. New opportunities for fashion designers have arisen as a result of the relatively strong economic growth rates many African countries have experienced recently. Economic growth rates of between 3-15 percent in many countries during the last decade (World Bank, 2014) has been accompanied by the emergence of a sizeable and growing middle class, a trend accompanied by changing lifestyles, urbanisation, a new economic and cultural assertiveness and greater spending power as well as greater political and cultural self-confidence among certain segments of the population (AfDB,

2011). The young designers predominantly belong to this growing middle class and they also target their products to this segment.

Most designers are young, and predominantly target youth. Youth in Africa is typically defined as the 18 to 35 year-old category, which constitutes a large and growing part of the African population. This growing youth population presents an opportunity for the creative industries since youth are known to be avid producers and consumers of creative products and services and often spearhead cultural transformations (Nilan and Feixa, 2006). At the same time, finding meaningful work is a key challenge for this growing youth population. Recent years of economic growth have not resulted in adequate job creation and in a context of neo-liberal economic policy young people are increasingly encouraged to create their own jobs through private enterprise (Langevang and Gough, 2012; Langevang et al., 2012; Gough et al., 2013).

The fashion industry is predominantly located in large urban areas across Africa. Lagos, Johannesburg and Cape Town, in particular, have developed into key fashion hubs in Africa and host relatively mature industries; they are home to a number of renowned designers, they host numerous fashion shows, and are home to a number of influential fashion magazines (Oberhofer, 2012). However, other large cities on the continent also host emerging, yet less developed, fashion industries. The focus of this paper is on understanding entrepreneuring in such emerging industries.

## Methodology

The paper builds on field research carried out between May 2010 and February 2012 in three African capital cities: Accra, Kampala and Lusaka. These three cities were selected since they host an emerging fashion industry and due to their differing geographical location in West, East and Southern Africa respectively. The aim was to gain a richer understanding of the emerging African fashion design industry by studying it in three different cities. Although the research design is a multi-sited study with a comparative dimension, it is not my objective to engage in synchronic analysis that merely describes similarities and differences. Rather, I adopt a processual approach to comparison that brings context and cross-cutting themes and practices into focus (Moore, 2005, Gough, 2012). While some variance between the sites does emerge, my focus is more on shared processes and practices which inevitably means that some differences, nuances and variations within and between the countries are downplayed.

In-depth interviews were carried out with 36 people (predominantly young women) running small independent fashion businesses. They were located through fashion schools, fashion and women's magazines, internet searches and through snowballing. The interview took a largely unstructured form with the respondents narrating their reasons for setting up their businesses, challenges and opportunities experienced and aspirations for the future. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours and were taped. Observations and informal conversations were also carried out at work places, at fashion shows and during different fashion events. Most respondents were in their twenties or early thirties. They included designers who were locally trained in professional fashion design or self-taught, as well as young women who had studied fashion abroad. While some were nationally and/or internationally renowned many others were

not. To obtain knowledge about the context and developments in the fashion sector other key players were also interviewed, such as 'first generation designers', teachers at fashion schools, and a number of individuals involved in the promotion of the fashion industry.

All the interviews were analysed thematically using manual coding. The coding was initially data-driven, implying that the codes were developed through analysis of the interview transcripts. Later the codes were related to the concepts of entrepreneuring and fictional expectations. During the analysis the codes were merged into four key themes which were prevalent across all interviews, namely: the wish to pursue passion, a quest to create cultural novelty, efforts to revitalise the clothing industry, and coping with the tensions and challenges of an emerging industry.

## Entrepreneuring through fashion design

The following analysis seek to illuminate how young fashion designers work creatively within the opportunities and constraints of the emerging fashion industry. The analysis highlights closely interlinked ambitions to bring about personal, cultural and socio-economic change, and reveals the key role played by narratives about the future potential of the industry in enabling entrepreneurs to cope with the downsides of the emerging industry.

### *Pursuing passion*

When designers explained their reasons for pursuing fashion as a career choice the word 'passion' was one of the most frequently used words. Monica from Uganda, for example, said:

'Deep inside me I have always wanted to be a fashion designer. It has always been my passion', and Kayda from Ghana explained:

> 'I just remember being really young, like around eight or nine, and just being really obsessed with designing stuff. I wasn't really good with sewing or sketching but still, that was all I thought about, that was my passion….. I was really always into dressing up others, and I would dress up my dolls, you know. I would find, like, toilet paper and somehow create a dress out of that and so there was just something in me, this is something I want to do'.

This wish for personal fulfilment was also emphasised by many designers. Aisha from Ghana expressed how she pursued fashion as an avenue for self-actualisation and personal achievement:

> 'The reason why I started, well, I was graduating and I didn't really know what to do, and I am the kind of a person that has to love what I am doing otherwise it is just, I mean it's fine, you can put me into any kind of institution, any kind of bank or something, I will be ok, but I probably won't be fulfilled. I guess in the back of my brain it is just fashion, because I have always loved fashion'.

For many of the designers their identity, personal values, and their work are closely connected. This is very evident in the personal story told by Towani from Zambia on the webpage of her label Kutowa Designs:

> 'My design influences come about as part of my personal style, an expression of who I am – half European, half African living in a predominately urban setting in Africa. I fuse

> Western and African fabrics in my designs because this represents who I am and the world that I live in. And I believe in this hybrid world beauty can be found.'

A few of the designers had given up what they described as good jobs in the private sector to pursue their passion for fashion and become independent business owners. Many designers, however, reported that they had to fight against the perceptions of friends and family that fashion is not a worthy career for well-educated women. It is because of their passion and the future prospects they see that they are willing to try to overcome obstacles and conventions. As one Ghanaian designer explained:

> 'Here in Africa fashion is not so big, like it is not a big industry, it is becoming so now, but before it wasn't like this. So when you were telling people that you were doing fashion design or something they were not really interested they are like 'fashion why go and do something like that? You can go and do business, accounting or marketing or something'. They tend to look down on fashion. But I was interested and I had the passion that is why I kept going.'

Although the fashion design profession in Africa is by no means reserved for women, the majority of fashion entrepreneurs are women. Generally, compared to other regions of the world the rate of female entrepreneurship is high and growing in many African countries. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) survey, which is the largest global survey of entrepreneurship activity in the world, shows that the highest regional female entrepreneurship levels can be seen in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 35-40 percent of the female population in Uganda, Zambia and Ghana involved in setting up or running a business less than three and a half years old (Kelley et al., 2013; Langevang et al., 2015). This high level of entrepreneurship is often explained with

reference to a high rate of 'necessity entrepreneurship' since women 'face higher barriers to entry in the formal labour market and have to resort to entrepreneurship as a way out of unemployment and, often, out of poverty' (Minniti and Naudé, 2010: 279). While the act of starting a business in such contexts does not, *per se*, imply a transgressing of gender norms, being highly ambitious and future oriented does defy gender stereotypes that tend to dismiss women's businesses in Africa as insignificant and survivalist rather than growth and opportunity oriented. The young, female fashion designers interviewed here clearly seek to distinguish themselves from 'necessity entrepreneurs' by emphasizing their high ambitions, and many take pride in their entrepreneurial mindset. In this sense, they resemble the highly enterprising Ghanaian 'businesswomen' (Darkwah 2007a, 2007b). As one designer expressed:

> 'My modus operandi is to do something different actually. For me that is where the excitement is, it is exciting as a designer, as a creative person, I get a kick out of making something, doing something that is different from what everyone else is doing and even different from what I did last time, otherwise I become bored.' (Zambian designer).

These stories show a strong commitment to, and affective investment in, their work, which has also been found to be prevalent among fashion designers in other regions and among other creative industry workers (McRobbie, 1998; Skov, 2002; Neff et al., 2005). Creating novelty motivates and excites them, and their entrepreneuring becomes a site for potential self-actualisation, self-expression and for changing the meanings associated with African female entrepreneurs.

***Transculturating***

The majority of the designers emphasised not only the personal potential but also the cultural significance of their entrepreneurship. Indeed, the pleasure they gain from fashion is intricately linked to opportunities for bringing about cultural change. For Zambian designer, Towani, a major motivation to start her fashion business was the urge to combat what she perceives as the Westernisation of clothing practices in Zambia:

> 'We need to do something about our local fabrics and dress, or else it is going to die and you are just totally going to be overwrapped with Western dressing, which is pretty much the case at the moment. But let's see if we can reverse the trend. There is definitely a wave of renaissance, African renaissance, you know in the music, the fashion is a bit behind, but it is there'.

The practices of fashion designers in Africa, as Rovine (2010) argues, provide rich 'insight into the impact of global networks of imagery and products as well as the continued relevance and popularity of indigenous styles of dress, often associated with traditional cultures'. African dress styles are often conceptualised as either 'traditional' or 'modern' with the first often representing African 'indigenous' or 'authentic' culture, and the other 'Westernisation'. These are often treated as dichotomies, yet what is considered to be 'African', 'traditional', and 'Western' is continuously changing, with international styles influencing changing styles of dress in Africa and African styles influencing the rest of the world (Rovine, 2010; Rabine, 2002). These sentiments were echoed by several of the young designers who noted these changing meanings:

> 'We were asking ourselves the other day 'are our clothes looking Western?' You know, the thing is the definition of what is Ghanaian also evolves over time. So I don't think that because we are insisting that we are Africans means that we have to hold on to the past, but it means that we need to appreciate the talent that we have and the creativity that we have here today. The influence is irreversible; I mean you can never undo contact with the outside and you can never erase the effect of that contact, so I am very happy to see all these different designs that are coming up'.

The designers I interviewed position themselves differently with regard to this African-Western dichotomy. Some designers do not see themselves as producing 'African clothing', and many intentionally strive to bridge or transcend that dichotomy. There is widespread discomfort about the labels 'African fashion' or 'African designer' among the designers, and many of them actively and strategically seek to bypass these labels, albeit without disowning them completely. As a designer from Uganda told me when I asked if there was anything distinctly 'African' or 'Ugandan' about her designs:

> 'I use both African and Western materials and my inspiration comes from different places, and then I create designs that I can't say are either African or Ugandan, they are international. These are designs that you feel comfortable putting on in Africa as well as abroad. You are not being described as putting on something African or Western…. Anyone should be able to wear my designs without feeling out of place.'

Indeed, many designers are motivated by the desire to create new designs, including new fusions of African and Western styles that have a 'global' appeal yet draw on 'African' inspiration and

represent what the designers term 'sophisticated', 'trendy' 'modern', or 'funky' designs. In practise this is mostly done by making use of readily available fabrics and other materials and symbols that are considered African but using them in innovative ways. Particularly popular are novel uses of African Prints. In the words of a young Ghanaian designer:

> 'I use African Print, but here before when you wore African Print it was always *Kaba and Slit* or *Bou Bou* or some sort, and that is really not my style, not that there is anything wrong with it, but I just felt that if you are young you can still show your African style and not be so trapped about it, so that is why I decided to start that. And people weren't really doing it at the time in African Print, maybe somebody would go to the tailor to have it made, but we didn't have a clothing line like that. There was maybe one other clothing line trying to do the same thing, but it wasn't trendy, so I was thinking why not do this?'

While 'African designs' and 'traditional wear' are typically associated with the older generation and predominantly used for special occasions, the new designers endeavour to create everyday wear that appeals to young people. In the words of Towani from Zambia:

> 'This is where I feel the new wave of African fashion is my style, which deviates from the more formal, functional type of dressing… The traditional dress is mainly worn for events like kitchen parties, which are equivalent to a bridal shower, weddings, maybe church outfits or if you are attending one of those functions, it is seen as a very formal kind of outfit, it is seen as quite something, more for respectable or older generations, so maybe it tends to be standard top and bottom combinations, sometimes a head-thing in it, on top as well. So what I was trying to do is make it funky and contemporary and give it a new

> lease of life. So that maybe more people my age and younger, as well as funky older people would identify with it'.

Designers use a range of terms to describe their styles, such as 'Ethnic eclectic', 'Afrochic', 'Afromance', and 'Afropolitan', highlighting their African influence but at the same time transcending it. Farber (2010) similarly shows how contemporary South African designers consciously and strategically produce a range of different 'African fusion styles' that display processes of transculturation. Only a few of the designers claimed that there was anything distinctly Ugandan, Zambian or Ghanaian in their styles, it was more the Africanness of their designs and identities that was continuously negotiated. Notably, the designers deliberately pick styles and materials associated with different parts of the continent and different ethnic groups within and beyond their own countries. Especially the Ugandan and Zambian designers often draw on clothing styles and materials associated with West Africa, which has long been considered the fashion hub of Africa with a rich and relatively enduring tradition for textile and dress production. Popular styles considered West African include the *boubou* (a loose robe made from a single piece of fabric and with a neck opening, worn both by men and women), the *kaftan* (a straight tunic adopted from Arab culture) and the *kaba* (a two- or three-piece women's dress that consists of a Western inspired sewn blouse, sewn or wrapped skirt, and an unsown cloth used as a second wrapper or head gear). The *smock*, worn by Ghanaian men, is a loose fitted shirt made from hand-loomed strips of fabric. It originated in northern Ghana and is, together with the *kente cloth* (associated with the Akan kingdom), considered Ghana's national dress. Designers creatively pick and choose from these different materials and styles and combine them in creative ways with fabric and styles considered 'Western'.

Compared to Ghana and other countries in West Africa, Uganda has not had as vibrant and persistent a textile tradition. Uganda is particularly known for their bark clothes made from stripped, scraped and beaten bark from the tropical fig, which was one of the first fabrics to be made in Africa. Although the production of this fabric was once very widespread and still has ritual significance, it declined rapidly during the nineteenth century, when imported cotton cloth started to dominate the East African market (Gillow, 2003). According to Nakazibwe and Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2010) most earlier dress traditions of Ugandan ethnic groups have faded away and are being replaced by 'new forms of expression which draw on cross-cultural interpretations of local forms, Western materials and concepts from elsewhere in Africa, Asia, and the middle East'. The *gomesi* dress is a case in point. The *gomesi*, which is considered the national dress for women, combines attributes from Uganda, India and Britain and was first adopted in the early twentieth century (Nakazibwe and Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2010). Ugandans have also appropriated both the *kitenge*, a printed cotton textile made in the Democratic Republic of Congo or West Africa (as well as Chinese copies of these), as well as *kikoi* and *kangas* which are particularly associated with Kenya and Zanzibar. Designers in Uganda borrow bits and pieces from these different dress cultures. For instance, at a fashion show in Kampala Ugandan designer, Stella Atal, combined Ugandan bark cloth, patterns and colours associated with West African *kente* cloth, with East African coastal *kikoi* material. These materials were used in new contexts, for example the *kente* pattern featured in a swim wear collection and the bark cloth was used to make a colourful gown.

In Zambia, several designers indicated that it is difficult to distinguish between clothing traditions from different nations and ethnic groups, thus echoing Simbao's (2010) statement that the history of dress in Zambia is complex and marked by migration and external influences:

> 'The wrap, Chitenge, which is probably similar to the sarong, that is very Zambian, but not uniquely Zambian, I think we share it with pretty much all countries around us, even with West Africa. […] Even the Chitambala [a head scarf] is also West African. The way we tie it may be a bit different, so the Chitambala we consider it very Zambian, the Chitambala and the Chitenge, but when I come to think of it, it is not uniquely Zambian' (Zambian designer).

These narratives confirm Hansen's (2013, p.1) statement that 'external influences in lifestyle, material culture, and dress conventions have become part of what people across Africa consider to be their own. The creative tensions that result from these processes are key to vibrant fashion encounters'.

In addition to endeavouring to make locals wear African produced clothes, most designers share a widespread aspiration to bring African produced fashion to the global market. In the words of a Ghanaian designer:

> 'I am looking to be global, because that is what I am trying to establish, so I don't want my brand to be stuck in Ghana. Not that there is anything wrong with that, but there is a whole world out there. The point is getting our prints outside in wearable ways that people of different cultures can actually appreciate. I don't want to be like an African designer, I don't want to limit myself to Africa, especially not Ghana'.

By endeavouring to reach global markets with their designs, the designers strive to highlight their abilities and show that 'what the West can do, we can also do it!', as one designer put it. At the same time, they offer alternatives to popular images of African dress and Africanness more broadly. Revealingly, Rovine (2010) notes how throughout history dress has been used as a tool for representing and misrepresenting African identities, being frequently used by Western observers to '…justify the classification of African cultures as primitive…" by '…sharply distinguishing between the creative, aesthetic motivations for Western dress from the supposedly simple practicality of African dress'. Although this racial discourse has vanished African fashion is still, for many people, closely associated with traditional attire (Rovine, 2010). By getting their 'modern' and 'trendy' designs onto the global scene the designers hope to change these representations and take a central place in the fashion world.

***Revitalising the clothing industry***

Whereas their parents' generation predominantly had their clothes custom made by local seamstresses and tailors there are now several alternative options. Trade liberalization has resulted in the mass importation of ready-made clothes, especially from the East, which cater to the style of clothing in demand among many young people and are cheaper than locally produced clothes (Langevang and Gough, 2012). Another source of ready-made clothes is the booming second-hand clothing industry which imports used clothing from around the world and which has affected African clothing practices immensely (Hansen, 2000; Brooks and Simon, 2012; Brooks, 2015). Alongside these changes, local manufacturing of fabrics has also declined. The colourful patterned cotton fabric called *African Print* in Ghana, *Chitenge* in Zambia and *Kitenge* in Uganda dates back to the early nineteenth century when European textile companies endeavoured to

develop factory-produced versions of hand-crafted Indonesian batiks, using special manufacturing techniques to copy the Javanese wax resist process. European manufacturers opened special African Departments devoted to designing, producing and marketing African Print fabrics (Gott, 2010). After independence, a number of African countries, including Ghana, set up government supported African Print cloth factories as a way to spur the private sector and create jobs in manufacturing. However, during economic restructuring in the 1980s and 90s governments were compelled to withdraw their support to the private sector and liberalise trade, resulting in the collapse of most of these factories. Today, imports of Chinese copies of African Prints are increasing rapidly, and these products typically copy the most popular releases by African textile industries. These Chinese imports are blamed for undercutting prices for locally made fabric and have been reported as a factor contributing to the fall of the clothing textile industry (Gott, 2010).

Witnessing the decline of the clothing and textile industry, many designers are motivated by an ambition to revitalise the industry and to spur development through business initiatives. As one Ghanaian designer explained when I asked why she had decided to start a fashion business:

> 'I have a national agenda in a sense. I feel a huge burden to see development in Ghana. I took some courses in NGO stuff and that, and I was thinking it is a lot of aid that's gone to Ghana and I don't really see what is happening. So I feel that the key to our development is industry and commerce…. I think we are missing that so this for me was really driven by the sense that we need to do more in terms of creating things and not just importing things. It's just basically I can't sit still and wait for things to happen; I have to be part of the action. …I think in Ghana we are very Western in our taste. So it occurred

> to me to ask, where does this African Print come from, and my dad said that apart from the little we are making in Ghana and a few other African countries this is coming from outside Africa. This is incredible, this is just ridiculous, because we have the raw materials, we have the printing, I can't see why we can't take our textile industry a little further. I thought 'we are already exporting that textile but we could also add value to it'. If we are designing clothes we are also deciding what types of textile people are wearing, so that gives us a chance to fight back against some of the Chinese imports, create jobs here in Ghana and so on and so forth.'

Concerns about the decline in clothing manufacturing and the resulting 'Westernization' of clothing practices were also voiced by a few of the Zambian designers:

> 'We used to do a lot of manufacturing, we used to export a lot of suits, we used to manufacture textiles, and we used to produce garments in Zambia. The few manufacturing places that we have now are making uniforms: uniforms for guards, uniforms for nurses, doctors, all the uniform workers. So our textile industry has been reduced to that, and even that is still a drop in the ocean, because most of the uniforms are probably still imported. So the bulk of whatever people wear that is made in Zambia is probably not even 1 per cent. And I might even be ambitious when I say 1 percent. If you took 200 people, how many are wearing something that is made in Zambia? In this room around us [a café in Lusaka], how many are wearing clothes made in Zambia? No, no one!'

In Uganda several fashion designers take pride in using locally grown organic cotton as a route to spur the cotton sector in the country and contribute to 'sustainable development'. The Ugandan designer, Sylvia Owori, launched a collection in 2011 called 'Fashion with a Purpose' which, apart from predominantly using locally grown organic cotton, also makes use of paper beads, a prevalent accessory in Uganda typically crafted from recycled paper by disadvantaged youth and women. Sylvia Owori has also launched some 'community development projects' through which she sources materials from disadvantaged women who she trains to produce crafts and textiles.

***Coping with tensions and challenges***

The designers are highly ambitious when describing their future expectations, with many aspiring to promote societal change by creating jobs, building big 'fashion houses', taking their fashion to the global scene and exporting both to regional and overseas markets. However, the discrepancy between these ambitions and the current state of the industry is striking. In current talks and writings about the fashion industry in Africa the prefix 'emerging' is almost always attached and the designers frequently use this term themselves. Although being part of an 'emerging industry' and operating in an 'emerging market' offer many opportunities, this also brings ambivalence, tensions and challenges. In contrast to studies from the global North, which have shown how the government's active involvement in promoting the creative industries, including fashion design, can serve to regenerate cities and create employment (see, for example, McRobbie, 2013), designers in Ghana, Uganda and Zambia are left to cater for themselves and work without the support of formal institutional structures. All designers lamented the lack of governmental support and complained that the fashion infrastructure and the private sector in general are not well developed. The designers were highly critical of the public fashion design education available locally, and the lack of skilled workers. Furthermore, in all three countries trusted

clothing manufacturers are almost non-existent, which poses a challenge to the designers' ambitions to up-scale production. As a consequence, like in most other creative industries in developing countries, the African fashion industry is presently characterized by 'craft-based or art-based cottage industries' (Barrowclough and Kozul-Wright, 2008, p. 5) where the young designers are in charge of all stages in the design, production and marketing process. The designers' yardstick for measuring the development of the industry is a Western model of professional design, manufacturing and mass marketing which is split into separate units and supported by formal institutions. Tellingly, when talking about the state of the fashion industry in their countries several designers claimed that 'there is no fashion industry'. In the words of a Zambian designer:

> 'In Zambia there is no industry. Here I have to do everything myself from scratch. You are the designer, you are the pattern maker, the sample sewer, right down to the marketing and everything, you are the whole industry. It's an advantage in that, well, you produce exactly what you want but it is a disadvantage because you are the whole system'.

While this emergent status characterised by few institutional rules and macro-structures provides freedom and space for creativity, it is also experienced as a constraint. One adverse consequence is that besides establishing a business of one's own, employment opportunities are limited, which means that by choosing fashion design as a profession the young people are automatically forced to pursue self-employment as the only career strategy. This also means that there are few apprenticeship places where experience can be garnered before venturing out as independent designers. According to the designers and other actors in the sector, a lot of young women fail during their first year trying to run a business. Moreover, for those who do manage to sustain

their businesses the incentives for creating jobs for other young people, and building up big fashion houses, are far from the daily reality of the designers and seem to be far out of reach for the majority of them. Earnings are often meagre and for the majority not enough to pay rent for a 'studio' or a 'boutique', and the majority of the designers rely on support from their families. Many designers operate from their homes, with some setting up a 'kiosk' or 'container' in the court yard or in front of the house where they run their businesses; while others transform corners of their bedrooms or living rooms into workshops. Most of the designers are one-woman-businesses with only a few of them employing a maximum of ten seamstresses or tailors, often on a part-time and irregular basis. While a few of the designers interviewed in each country have made ready-to-wear collections, the vast majority spend most of their time sewing custom-made clothing for individuals in the local market. Only a few of the designers had established their own small boutiques, while only a couple used other retailers or internet portals as distribution channels.

Some of the most successful designers had participated in international fashion shows and had achieved coverage in international fashion magazines; however, none of the designers were exporting more clothes than they themselves, acquaintances or clients could carry in their suitcases when travelling. It is mainly through 'suitcase trade' (Rabine, 2002) that their products are circulated in international markets, and it is also through these relatively small-scale informal channels that designers acquire styles and fabrics from other communities. While all designers saw great potentials in the local market, which they all perceived as growing, several designers also spoke about the enormous opportunities represented by the African diaspora in the US and the UK who, according to the designers, are increasingly eager to display their African yet

cosmopolitan identities through their dress. The designers were less certain, however, how they could exploit these opportunities on a larger scale. A key challenge to increase local sales is to convince locals to buy the more expensive African made fashion, while exporting presents logistical problems.

The aim of sourcing materials locally is not without challenges either as the supply and variety of locally produced fabrics are limited and the price significantly higher than the imported products. As a consequence, one Ghanaian designer firm had had to give up on their initial policy on sourcing at least 70 percent of their fabric from local manufacturers. Consequently, like the vast majority of the designers they are compelled to buy the cheaper and more varied Chinese materials.

A further challenge is the lack of established national or international umbrella organisations that could unite the designers. The designers univocally described the fashion scene as being characterized by competition, fragmentation and very limited cooperation which they think is detrimental to the development of the industry. As a Ghanaian designer explained:

> 'Here it is more like a competition. There are very few people who will share. It is more about competition than it is about helping each other. Everybody is just doing their own thing. I am really dying to be in an environment where I can interact with other designers. But here there is nothing like putting something up together, we just sew independently'.

These narratives show that even though the designers gain pleasure from their work, they also suffer from feelings of isolation, lack of mentorship and uncertain career prospects, experiences similar to those of creative workers in the global North. A range of studies have shown that

while creative workers are often attracted to the creative industries because of passion and a wish for self-actualisation, independence and creative change making, creative labour tends to be rather precarious and irregular, earnings low or non-existent, and career prospects uncertain (see, for example, McRobbie, 1998; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; Scott, 2012). Consequently, many creative workers experience a complex and ambivalent feeling of freedom (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010).

Some designers yearned to fill these voids in the fashion industry themselves, recognizing that the government was unlikely to help them out. They dreamed of opening fashion schools themselves, and some had become involved in developing national and regional fashion designer networks and associations, fashion shows, magazines and internet forums, initiatives which speak volumes about their relentless efforts to move the industry forward. Instead of letting themselves be overwhelmed by the above-mentioned difficulties, their orientations towards the future combined with the industry's perceived potential help them to persist. Despite experiencing hardship and at times disorientation, the fashion entrepreneurs remain enthused by powerful stories about transformation and compelling mental images of the potential future.

## Conclusion

Adopting the perspective of entrepreneuring, this article shows that African fashion designers have multiple, closely interlinked ambitions to bring about personal, cultural and socio-economic change. The designers endeavour to support the resurgence of local textile traditions and craftsmanship, they seek to showcase new directions in African fashion, and they follow their

passion for fashion and desire to bring about positive changes in their lives through fashion design. These efforts are emancipatory in the sense that they free young women from the constraints imposed by conventional norms and practices, they widen the cultural associations ascribed to Africa and its place in the (fashion) world, and they enable new images of young African women as ambitious entrepreneurs. Viewing the efforts of the young women in terms of *entrepreneuring* allows a comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurship which is not restricted to the economic domain. As this paper demonstrates, fashion design in Africa provides a rich site for understanding how people are entrepreneuring 'to change their lives and those of others and, in the process, are changing the places where they live' (Hanson, 2009, p. 247).

Revealing the contradictory dynamics at play in the fashion sector, the paper has also shown the need not to overemphasize the agency of the entrepreneurs, the pleasure involved in entrepreneuring, or their actual ability to spur development. The stories of the fashion designers are certainly characterized by a high degree of ambition, creativity and passion yet tensions, disorientation and fragmentation also mark the fashion sector. The emerging nature of the industry and the market in which the designers operate makes sustaining, let alone growing, a business highly challenging and the work experiences of the women, while full of pleasure and passion, are also marked by frustration, worry and isolation. Accordingly, their experiences of 'entrepreneuring as emancipation' (Rindova et al., 2009) are highly ambivalent. In this ambiguous and uncertain situation, fictional expectations play a key role. These are manifest in narratives about the great potential of the fashion industry for creating personal, cultural and economic change and in compelling mental pictures of future opportunities. These fictional expectations motivate the designers and can help explain why fashion design attracts a great

number of young women willing to commit themselves to highly uncertain and challenging endeavours.

From a policy perspective, the findings indicate that while fashion design has development potential as part of the creative economy, and is able to attract highly ambitious and driven entrepreneurs, lack of institutional support and cooperation are major barriers to realizing this potential. Notably, while international attention is now being paid to the development potential of the creative industries, these discourses have not yet materialized into coherent policies and support mechanisms at the regional, national and local levels in Africa.

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