

# AFRICAN LUXURY RISING

*By Thebe Ikalafeng*



When David Tlale, the first South African Fashion designer to showcase solo at the Mercedes Benz Fashion Week in New York in September 2012 kicked off the first day of the recent New York Fashion Week, it was another crowning moment for Africa - and a designer known for his daring craftsmanship.

At this annual showcase of over 250 shows of indulgent couture that sets the style agenda for coming seasons which is dominated by global luxury brands such as Dior, Chanel and Hermes, a collection by an African was always going to be a difficult proposition. Since the 70s, at this and other similar shows in Paris and London, Africans have always been few and far in-between. Between the 70s when Iman, the Ethiopian beauty with flawless 'acceptable' European walked the global runways through to the 90s when Alek Wek, the first black model whose looks did not conform to Caucasian aesthetics, ethnic Africans were always on the ramp, in and never behind, the collections. At best, Africa, was 'a country' and a romantic escape to the jungles, safari and sun celebrated by Robert Redford and Meryl Streep in the 1985 American epic romantic drama "Out of Africa". At worst Africa was a dark place of war, famine, poverty and pity.

But Africa is no stranger to style, fashion or luxury.

Tlale's bold approach to creativity is reminiscent of an African era in the 1950s in Brazzaville, Congo when the *la Sape* (Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes) - the Society of Elegant Persons of the Congo, were the embodiment of exaggerated elegance and flamboyance, in stark contrast to their environment of slavery, poverty and political uncertainty. Inspired by the 1920s dandy styles of their former French and Belgian colonial masters who sought to 'civilize' 'naked' Africans by paying them with second hand clothing from Europe, *la Sape* was an 'escape' from their daily treatment as worthless citizens.

It was no different further South, where mining migrant workers in the 1950s in South Africa's poorest neighbourhoods by day toiled in the mines and at night exchanged filthy overalls for male finery to compete for the title of 'the best-dressed man'.

Long post independence, Africa is growing confident, independent and enterprising – and a new class of elite with access to unimaginable wealth are splashing on luxury. African economies are fast outpacing other regions globally with an average growth in excess of 5%. According to the World Wealth Report by Capgemini, the number of high net worth individuals (HNWI) in Africa is skyrocketing. While only growing by 3.1% over 2012–15 (compared to 9.9% in 2011–12 and second only to North America), the growth rate of HNWI in Africa is still positive. The number of dollar millionaires and billionaires in sub-Saharan capitals are growing at a rapid rate. Led by the likes of Nigerian industrialist Aliko Dangote (\$24bn), Angolan investor Isabel dos Santos (\$4 B) and South African mining magnate Patrice Motsepe (\$2bn), African billionaires are estimated to grow by 117% over the next decade, the second-fastest regional rate of growth in the world after Asia. According to McKinsey's Rise of the African Consumer Report, Africa's consumer-facing industries are expected to grow by more than \$400 billion by 2020.


As Africans become wealthier, they have been seeking a growing number of luxury goods at home and abroad commensurate with their new status. At the same time leading global brands are looking to Africa as a destination for growth. Across Africa's leading capitals of Nairobi (Kenya), Lagos (Nigeria), Luanda (Angola) and Johannesburg (South Africa), Rolls-Royces, Bentleys, Aston Martins, Lamborghinis and McLaren supercars are jostling for position on highways alongside Tuk-Tuks, Matatus and Zola Budds. African designers such as David Tlale and the trail-blazing Xhosa-inspired knitwear designer Laduma Ngxokolo are now gaining confidence to create 'Made in Africa' luxury brands for Africa and the world. Along with the likes of Swaady Martin-Leke, the elegant South African-based Ivorian entrepreneur and

founder of YSWARA, a growing African global luxury brand of gourmet tea, chocolates and homeware, and competing as equals alongside the likes of Alexander McQueen, Jimmy Choo, Godiva Chocolates and Cartier luxury at leading African luxury destinations at Johannesburg's Hyde Park and in Sandton City's luxury precincts, to serve African and international visitors.

Africans now look the likes of Luminance, the first multi-brand luxury boutique for their desired premium brands rather than having to travel to Harrods in London or Galerie Lafayette in Paris.

According to the Deloitte 'Global Powers of Luxury Goods' Report, the emerging markets of Asia Pacific, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa accounted for a combined 19 percent of the global luxury goods market in 2013 – a figure projected to grow to 25 percent in 2025. Sub-Saharan Africa is second only to Asia Pacific in terms of the size of growth of consumer markets. While in the recent Brand Africa 100 research and ranking of brands in Africa, non-African brands represent only 20% of all the most admired brands and only 1% of the value of the most valuable brands seems a steep road ahead, the upward trajectory, especially in the luxury sector, is unquestionable.

Africans such as Oscar-winning Kenyan Lupita Nyong'o, the face of global luxury brands such as Miu Miu who was named the Most Beautiful Woman in the World by *People Magazine* in 2014, are no longer trying to out-do their former masters with hand-me-downs but are now leading trends globally. As Africans assert their identity and flex their economic muscles, luxury brands will become increasingly important expression of their identity and status. A continent once dismissed by the *Economist* in 2002

as "a hopeless continent" is now rising as the *Economist* acknowledged in 2010. 

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Top and Shorts by David Tlale

