

The New York Times

Africa Takes Its Turn on the Runway

By Whitney Richardson Aug. 18, 2016

[Link to story](#) on NYTimes.com

It was a fashion show that stopped traffic.

On one of the largest cable bridges in southern Africa, hundreds of the fashion elite had gathered around midnight to watch David Tlale's highly anticipated fall 2011 show. To commemorate the occasion, Mr. Tlale shut down the Nelson Mandela Bridge, turning the busy roadway into a runway. Ninety-two models, one for each year of Nelson Mandela's life at the time, crossed the bridge as lights from the city skyline illuminated the stage.

Sitting in the front row was the Swedish-born photojournalist Per-Anders Pettersson, who has spent the last five years documenting the vibrant fashion scene across sub-Saharan Africa.

His new photography book, "African Catwalk," is a visual survey of Africa's emerging fashion industry, giving viewers an insider's perspective on a transcontinental spectacle that often goes unseen.

The "roadway turned runway" show in Johannesburg was one of more than 40 events Mr. Petterson photographed, traveling to some 16 countries across the continent. Regional and subtle cultural distinctions become apparent in many of the images.

The West African designer Deola Sagoe creates contemporary designs using adire fabric hand-dyed in Nigeria by women of the Yoruba tribe; the East African jewelry designer Ami Doshi Shah pays homage to her Kenyan roots through large-scale adornments.

Several of the designers featured, including Mr. Tlale and Laduma Ngxokolo, who designs the MaXhosa label, have shown their work internationally, but Mr. Pettersson concentrated on shows in Africa.

In the more established African fashion weeks, in Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa, designers, models and buyers converge from all over the continent, and African-born designers who work abroad often return to showcase their latest Western-inspired collections.

In his years in Africa, Mr. Pettersson, 49, has witnessed the growth of fashion there, which he links to a growing upper-middle class in Africa's largest cities. "Some of the things happening

with the fashion industry is also the result of what's been happening the past seven years in Africa," he said. "There is more money, better education and people are traveling more."

Mr. Ngxokolo is in a way a poster child for this evolution. In 2010, he started MaXhosa (pronounced Ma-hoe-sah), a knitwear line, to celebrate amakrwala, a traditional Xhosa rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. As Mr. Ngxokolo describes the ritual, young men complete a four-week initiation process, after which they give up their belongings and dress in dapper attire for the first six months of their new independence.

Having gone through the ritual himself, Mr. Ngxokolo, 29, identified a gap in the market, knowing that hundreds of young Xhosa men would be outfitted with new clothes that didn't represent their culture.

"When we come back, our parents bring us quality clothes, as send-off presents," Mr. Ngxokolo said. "The awkward part is that our parents buy us a Western standard of clothes. There are none that are specifically designed for this tradition."

His high-end designs, made with local South African materials, are inspired by the intricate beadwork of the Xhosa group. The line won the 2015 Vogue Italia Scouting for Africa prize, allowing Mr. Ngxokolo to show his collection at the Palazzo Morando Show in Milan.

And while he has been successful, Mr. Ngxokolo acknowledges the difficulties that emerging designers have in the international market, including the challenge of meeting growing demands while navigating the lagging infrastructure in their home countries.

Mr. Pettersson echoed this sentiment, noting that many African designers do not have the resources or training to produce their designs on a large scale.

"A lot of young designers are trying to be the next Valentino," Mr. Pettersson said. "But if you look closely underneath the clothes, threads may be hanging or it doesn't quite fit properly."

"The modern African consumer is becoming more sophisticated," he said. "It's hard for designers without the support to keep up with their expectations."

Several initiatives aim to close this resource gap, including the African Fashion International (A.F.I.), one of the more established fashion platforms on the continent, and the creative force behind the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in Johannesburg and Cape Town. The organization's Fast Track program is a yearlong incubator to mentor new designers.

Bryan Ramkilawan, the newly appointed head of fashion at A.F.I., said that in the next few years the organization will take a more “business first” approach in structuring its events and training programs. “We are looking at how we can grow sustainable businesses,” he said. “We want to be able to buy collections from the designers and get them into stores.”

Much as emerging African designers grapple with expanding their lines, many models seek international exposure, hoping to be the next Alek Wek, the South Sudanese model who was discovered in London after fleeing a civil war in her home country.

The cover of Mr. Pettersson’s book is a portrait of the 23-year-old Ugandan model Patricia Akello wearing a wax fabric necklace lined with tiny yellow beads by the Ugandan label Halisi.

Ms. Akello moved to South Africa two years ago to pursue her modeling career, signing with Fusion Models and walking in Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Berlin in 2015 and 2016. She said she has been able to support herself as a model, and she is moving to New York later this month for castings (she is now with Muse Management) for the city’s shows in September.

“One day I will be an icon in this business,” Ms. Akello said. “I’ve wanted this for a long time.”