

SONWABILE NDAMASE

Coming of age

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The way we dress says a lot about us. Whether we like it or not, our clothes often tell a story of who we are, what culture we belong to and for many, a status symbol of what they can afford on the skin of their backs.

Whether we choose to buy into fads or express our culture through the way we dress, the fact remains that attire and identity are often interlinked. This fact is nothing new to Africa's innovative new generation of designers, who through their crafts, keep the continent firmly rooted in its diverse heritage.

With its sights set on an inclusive and aesthetically representative fashion industry in South Africa, the South African Fashion Designers Agency (SAFDA) annually showcases the finest of the country's dynamic young fashion creatives through the Vukani! Fashion Awards.

Now in its 22nd year, the FP&M SETA Vukani! Fashion Awards has been called the portal through which the evolution of the first generation of South Africa's fashion artistry can be witnessed since the advent of democracy. This has ensured the agency's ability to stay ahead of the curve in a rapidly changing environment.

Sonwabile Ndamase, founder and CEO of the Vukani! Fashion Awards, is also the man who designed the colourful shirts which Madiba loved to wear. In this month of reconciliation, two years after the passing of the father of our nation, BBQ spoke to Ndamase about the business of fashion, the latest trends in the African fashion space, and the interesting links between African heritage, Ubuntu, and fashion.

Ndamase, also president of SAFDA, has a long history in the South African fashion industry which stretches all the way back to the struggle days.

A request from Madiba

As Ndamase explains, the motivation came as a request from Madiba himself. "Tata himself gave me the brief on how and what he would like to wear, which was also influenced by his health at the time. You will remember vividly clear that during the time he was still in prison on Robben Island, they were crushing stones which were quite alkaline. This affected him as it got into his lungs and that is why he ended up having lung infection. He needed something that, when he was working, would be nice and cool to his body. He asked me to come up with something that is exclusive and well-behaved as an outfit.

"I sent him quite a number of ideas and he picked this particular one. After I took his measurement, he said to me, 'I know you because you have been dressing my wife Winnie. I have been told that you are the one that has been dressing this family'. He said he has already got an image but needs his own look. That is when then I started to create that kind of a shirt for him," he says.

Ndamase says when the Vukani! Fashion Awards came about in 1993, it was part of what he refers to as the political evolution of fashion. Since that time, Ndamase has, through SAFDA and the awards, taken designers who were on the periphery and brought them to the mainstream. SAFDA has itself been in existence as early as 1988, under the very leadership of Ndamase.

Through his work with SAFDA and the Awards, Ndamase has claimed widespread recognition. In 1994, the Mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, proclaimed the 13th of March as Vukani Day. Then in 1995, Ndamase and his team were the first to create gowns for the Gauteng government. He however admits, that besides his many accolades, the Madiba shirts have remained the one product that has brought him the most recognition.

So how does fashion tie in with African identity? According to Ndamase, fashion has constantly been evolving with regard to the times and context. "One thing I always do is to look at how history has been evolving and how our country has been evolving. This time around we have been dealing with xenophobic attacks. We had quite a lot of turmoil in terms of the politics in the country, and you must understand that fashion plays a role in the politics of the time. Everybody dresses according to the feel and the ethos of the politics of the time.

"Because clothes are symbols, they tell who you are, where you are coming from and where you are going to. Therefore when I came up with the theme that embodied Ubuntu, I was trying to send a message: we as young and upcoming designers cannot be fooled by what is happening around the world and embody Ubuntu so that they can show who we are and where we are coming from," he says.

Looking at how African identity and heritage is changing, Ndamase says one needs to remember that people are unique and that factors such as religion and culture plays a big role. He says our cultures play an important role in terms of our way of interpreting who we are, and this he says can in turn play a unique part in affecting, in his case for instance, designs going forward. He further points out that this means that in today's day and age, the time has passed where people are looked down upon because of their traditional African attire.

Ndamase says he has even noted an accommodating attitude from corporate South Africa and that often, business invitation give the option of dressing in traditional attire. "They will say on invitations 'traditional or ...', because they understand that people are unique, you cannot bow them down to the European way of dressing," he says.

Current trends

To Ndamase, the current trends in the African fashion industry does not denote a developing African identity as much as it does a claiming thereof. He says it is not about having to change or give Africans a new look, but rather to be endorsed in the mainstream for who and what we are.

Ndamase says when looking at the international arena, there are a number of inroads, something he is well aware of having done a number of shows abroad during the 90s.

He does however stress that when it comes to international collaboration, it cannot be good unless there is capital injection back home. "In terms of the entry points to capital back home, they are very bureaucratic. You will come with your idea to the international arena and because they have funding and ways and means for them to manufacture the idea, we will become consumers again, not manufacturers. We keep on sending our ideas overseas and that is why when you go to their platforms of international exposure, they look at your products and buy them. After buying them they go and produce them in large numbers. At home we cannot produce because we do not have factories, we do not have capacity, we do not have capability and we do not have capital.

"Now, your idea has been stolen, and it is going to be sold back to you because it has been redesigned. Our own buyers here do the same thing. They go internationally to steal the ideas and they bring them home. That is why our industry is called a cut-throat industry, it is a dog-eat-dog

industry. It is also very labour intensive because it creates so many jobs. But that is why these guys get so excited when we go and showcase because we give them new ideas, internationally. And they grab those ideas,” he says.

Ndamase says that is why when looking at countries like China, when they see a product and have identified a trend, they jump onto it and since they have SMMEs and money back home to back them, they manufacture these products and bring them back to the very same African countries to sell. “Even now if you go to a small street in Johannesburg, you will find that people who are manufacturing our own traditional clothing are not South Africans.”

“They go to KwaZulu-Natal and steal that culture. They go and buy things in the Eastern Cape or they go to Mpumalanga. And guess what, now I cannot produce a Xhosa outfit with the same price that is being sold downtown. My price is very expensive, but their price is cheap. Even if the quality is not up to the same grade, whether you are looking at the Xhosa, Zulu, Shangaan, or Pedi items, I cannot compete with those guys downtown,” he says.

Better branding

Ndamase further points out that a lot of these items today are not even produced from natural fabric, but rather plastic. As he puts it, “It is no longer 100% cotton, it is now 100% polyester---and not even 100% proudly South African.” Ndamase advocates for better branding when it comes to striving for proudly South African products and says ‘windowdressing’ the industry will not work – it needs solid financial support. He also vouches for increased protection for designer. He uses the example that if fabrics are generic and not locally produced, it can easily be duplicated abroad and be sold off as originals.

“We are all for protection as much we are living in the free market society. South Africa must not sell itself out to international relationships. South Africa must be in a position to take a stand when it comes to certain things. We must be in a position to say to company A or company B, if you cannot come and manufacture in this country of ours, we are not giving you this product.

“Of all the African materials, few are South African because quite a number of factories have closed down. Even with your Da Gama’s, who are coming up with what we call isiShweshwe fabric, you will find that we actually adopted it. It was not of our own origin. In South Africa, most of the companies that are now producing locally have been bought by foreign companies. Now we are having a lot of lesser fabric that are homegrown. All the fabrics that you see now are foreign,” he says.

Ndamase does believe that we should start producing more locally, but says this is but one of many recommendation regarding the industry. He highlights the importance of increased Government support in changing the current status quo in the fashion and clothing industry in South Africa and points out that most importantly, this should involve the growing of small business.

He says unfortunately, the clothing industry is declining, when looking at where it is supposed to be in the mainstream economy. “Where they were supposed to be giving more jobs, what has happened is that there is now more people that are actually losing their jobs in the mainstream and there is quite a number of that. When it comes to unemployment it is one of the things that needs a little bit more intervention from the unions. And unions again, they need to be educated in terms of how they place themselves in this particular mainstream of the industry. Because if you look at how the industry has shrunk in terms of opportunities that were supposed to be given out to every child that got into an institution of learning---they were anticipating two to five jobs that could be

created---but unfortunately things have turned around. Now when this child leaves the institution of learning, he or she is not absorbed by the industry because of the few opportunities.

“Now you find that companies like Edgars and Woolworths are not at all interested in taking on these new talents. You also find that the education that is coming out of training institutions, is an education that is not of high quality. The reason this is that the institutions have now turned around, and used their own students, employing them while they have no exposure in the market. Now any young person that is clever and understands the books or doing well at the institutions end up being absorbed by these training institutions. How can you use a young person that has never been tested out there in the market place as one of the lecturers? Never have they started any business of their own. Now you tell me, what kind of a product do we have out there?” he says.

Innovation in Africa

On a more positive note however, Ndamase says Africa is definitely a leader when it comes to innovation. He says that while Africa is usually the one that comes up with innovation, it is not that well recognised on the international arena and is often simply seen as a ‘muse’. For this reason, Ndamase says he is sceptical when collaborating with the rest of the world because in terms of innovation, it is stolen by the international world before Africa can even claim it.

“Africa is fresh, Africa is new, Africa is energetic, and Africa hasn’t yet explored its own core. We have got so much to offer to the world, and that is why the world wants to conquer us. Unfortunately we are too humble to make a noise on the international arena. On a positive note we are a country that is recognised internationally, but unfortunately they caught us on our weak spot. They catch us too easily catch because of how we sell ourselves. We are scared, and we rally against Ubuntu. We are supposed to use Ubuntu to conquer the world, not use Ubuntu to humble us,” Ndamase concludes.