

ZANZIBARS FIRST LOVE

SWAHILI COAST MAGAZINE

The kanga is a simple piece of cotton cloth, rectangular in shape, printed with a medley of vivid colours and designs. Each is inscribed with a phrase of 'Swahili wisdom'. It's been described as 'mythical', 'mesmerising', 'magnetic', the embodiment of Swahili art, culture and custom. The kanga is a cornerstone of Swahili life, treated with a passion similar to Western women's love for shoes. One can never own too many kangas!

The recent history of the kanga explains the appeal for this humble piece of cloth. The kanga appeared in its present form in the early 1900s. Around this time, former slaves and their freeborn children were beginning to adopt elements of free dress, which had formerly been forbidden. New forms of fashion were created as a public and daily expression of their growing autonomy. The kanga was part of this evolution, serving as a powerful medium for self identity and expression. With its festive colours and telling proverbs, it embodied the emancipation of generations of slaves, symbolising the celebration of freedom, of the body and soul.

Today, the appeal of the kanga has grown into an international affair. With the massive tourism boom in Zanzibar and the growing number of expats on the isles, the kanga has evolved again, morphing into an exportable, Western fashion item. Flowing kanga dresses and skirts adorn bronzed holiday makers soaking up the African sun, brilliantly coloured kanga shirts replace Hawaiian prints, and toddlers in frolic on the beach in cheerful kanga pinafores.

The 'new' kanga fashion phenomenon finds its roots in a passion for the exotic shared by people worldwide. It's certainly nothing new for foreigners living in Zanzibar to take beautifully patterned kangas to the *fundi* (tailor) to copy clothes brought from home or tourists to bring back kangas as gifts for friends. This has given rise to a growing number of collaborative ventures between local and expatriate partners, transforming the kanga from a local fashion to stylish designs for an international market.

Margarita Marvasi, founder of kanga fashion line *Mago East Africa*, sits waiting for me, sipping fresh pineapple juice, overlooking the sparkling blue archipelago waters. The port is closed for renovation and two massive cargo ships are beached on the shore, offloading their goods metres away from the restaurant in the sunshine. It's an odd backdrop to our ensuing discussion about African textiles and Italian media, but somehow appropriate, given the context.

Design was more a redirection than a calling for Margarita. Originally from Bologna, Italy, Margarita worked a fashion journalist for Italy's famed *la Repubblica*. After a two year separation from her husband who was in Zanzibar building a hotel, she threw in her job and relocated permanently to Africa to join him. "Previously I had been very unsure. It can be impossible to get back into the workforce in Italy once you leave. But then something clicked. A fit of craziness or passion, I'm not sure which." She immediately fell in love with the vibrant fabrics on offer and began to reinvent her own wardrobe and surroundings. What started out as a hobby fast became a project

with enormous business potential.

The *Mago East Africa* collection is chic, cosmopolitan and distinctive. Designs concentrate on shaped proportions, soft lines following the body's shape. The concept is to create clothing that embodies the soul and unique character of East Africa whilst retaining a European appeal. The line has been wildly successful. After gradual increase in distribution throughout Zanzibar and abroad, Margarita recently secured deals with three exclusive boutiques in Italy; Hightech in Milan, La Casa dello Sport in Bologna and L'anatra all 'Arancia in Rome.

She leans over secretively, her petite frame wrapped in a best selling red, blue and white motif tie dress, "I'd never done that sort of thing before. I literally went around to these exclusive boutiques in Italy with a suitcase of my designs, taking them out one by one and showing them." She is now in negotiations with a Spanish distributor, who wants exclusive rights to sell in Europe and South America.

Like Margarita, Lotta Gillving, Head Designer and founder of *Kanga Kabisa* has found her concept for kanga fashion far exceeded her initial expectations. Lotta, also from a fashion background, trained in Sweden in the art of dying textiles to create theatre costumes. When her Tanzanian born husband Johan, a theatre producer, was offered a job with the ZIFF Film Festival, they moved to Zanzibar with their seven month old son in 2004.

"I had initially planned to stay home with our son while Johan worked, but when I found it so difficult to get children's clothing in decent materials, I started to make them myself. Originally they were not in kanga material but then I began to branch out and experiment with the amazing African patterns and colours." The reaction from friends and colleagues was overwhelmingly positive, planting the seed for Zanzibar's most well known kanga fashion label.

Lotta, a quiet, artistic lady, began to work tirelessly on her designs. Johan explains his wife's creative process over lunch. "Lotta is a night person, so I would go to bed with our son of an evening and Lotta would sit up at the sewing machine. In the morning we'd wake up to find another new creation waiting on the kitchen table." Since then, the company has boomed.

The ethos of the *Kanga Kabisa* label is very much about what Johan calls 'ethical fashion'. *Kanga Kabisa* currently sources as much fabric as they can locally. Much of the couple's attention in the future will be focused on sourcing all their textiles directly from the weavers. They believe in developing fair trade practises in East Africa with sustainable environmental practises to build a solid, healthy business community.

Kanga Kabisa was the first kanga fashion label to have a shop front in Stone Town and this presence has no doubt added to their popularity. The line has extended beyond Lotta's 'dabbling' in children's clothes and now encompasses women's and men's clothing and accessories. The designs are fun, colourful and quirky. Endearing pieces like oven mitts and infant diaper covers make *Kanga Kabisa* one of the most appealing lines to Zanzibar's tourists.

The newest addition to kanga fashion in Zanzibar is the work of Doreen Mashika. Born and raised in Tanzania, Doreen studied and worked in Switzerland in Luxury Goods Fund Management, where she found herself inspired by the commercial fashion designers. Her love for the immense cultural heritage of Africa motivated her to return to explore the wealth of design possibilities. Doreen uses kanga, kitenge and canvas to create Afro-vintage accessories including shoes and hand bags. "Shoes permit me a greater display of the unconventional use of exotic and traditional signature materials and prints, perhaps not seen anywhere else, and especially particular to the Tanzanian culture."

Her exciting range also includes silver and gold jewellery and a broad range of accessories such as hand bags and belts. Some pieces incorporate semiprecious gemstones, wood, animal horn and Maasai beads in their design. Already available via mail order to mainland Tanzania and on location in Europe and the United States, the imminent opening of her boutique in Hurumzi promises Zanzibar will see a lot more of Doreen Mashika and her exclusive designs.

The upsurge in this cultural fusion of fashion is achieving more than meets the eye. Not for profit projects like *Upendo means love* in Stone Town and *Malkia* in Bwejuu, provide local communities with direct benefits from the popularity of kanga fashion through vocational training and income. Both focus on the empowerment of women through education and work, which in turn provides growing prosperity to the communities they come from.

Upendo mean love grew from a broader community project run by the Norwegian mission to promote religious tolerance between the Muslims and Christians. Left in charge of finding a way to bring women in the different communities closer together, Mama Noah found what the women wanted most was to learn how to sew to supplement their income. "Shortly after we started the sewing classes, I found that the Christian women no longer sat apart from their Muslim classmates in the tea room."

Four years down the track, *Upendo means love* Sewing School trains thirty women to the national VETA exam level annually. Eight of the inaugural round of students work full time in the *Upendo* workshop, sewing an exquisite range of children's clothing that makes the *Upendo* outlet in Shangani one of the most charming shops in Stone Town. Small batches of the garments, chiefly made out of kanga and kikoï material, are also exported to Norway through friends and colleagues of the project.

Similarly, the women's collective *Malkia* stemmed from the friendship between local Bwejuu resident, Salama and Iben, a Danish tourist visiting on holiday. After teaching Salama the art of sewing and cutting, and encouraging her to take up tailoring as a vocation, Iben started taking the garments back to Denmark to sell. Through the money from sales in Europe, the *Malkia* collective slowly took form.

Malkia now consists of ten seamstresses, who sew an extensive collection of women's and children's clothing, all designed by Iben. Iben has come and gone many times since then and still provides financial and marketing support to the collective. The increase in income has been a very positive development for the women and their families. Salama laughs when I ask her how the new found independence of the *Malkia* women is accepted by their men, "They love it! Sometimes they come to their wife to

ask for money for soda!"

The dynamic patterns and magnificent colours of the kanga continue to inspire and delight. Local women and visitors wear the same fabrics, oblivious to the fusion of culture or historical significance their outfits represent. As Zanzibar develops, so will the interest in this new brand of fashion but the question now is whether Zanzibar can keep up with the demand. "It will be a challenge for Zanzibar to have a manufacturing industry that supplies Europe." Margarita Marvasi sighs as we finish our chat. "Regardless, I still love the concept and seeing the idea become reality."

Kanga Kabisa

www.kangakabisa.com

Mago East Africa

www.magoeastafrica.com

Upendo

www.upendomeanslove.com

Malkia

www.malkia.dk

Doreen Mashika

www.doreenmashika.com