

# Kanga Hits the Runway: Fashion and an East African Textile

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The East African textile, kanga, has been culturally embedded since its inception over a century ago. Most recently, this mass-produced, industrially printed textile has made a splash on high fashion runways. My research is documenting these textiles' historical emergence, their transformations in use, and their contemporary social significance in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Born of global networks of trade, kanga textiles feature bold, machine-printed designs on factory-produced cloth. Kanga are defined by their basic design: a central motif surrounded by a wide, continuous graphic border. They also display a proverb or phrase in Swahili, framed just below the central motif. Originally a coastal style, kanga are now worn widely throughout East Africa and are considered bearers of East African culture.

Sold in pairs, kanga are relatively inexpensive and serve as a staple item for many East African households. They are worn as everyday clothing for market women and are used by most women inside their homes. Kanga are also used in transitional moments of women's lives. These textiles feature in wedding celebrations: they are worn at send-offs, gifted at kitchen parties, and are shown off at wedding ceremonies. Kanga also swaddle newborns and shroud the dead, thereby enveloping women in Swahili culture from birth to death.

While residing in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, I have been pursuing a relatively new arena for kanga: the fashion world. Although kanga have long been the staple dress for everyday East African women, kanga are now taking the East African fash-



ion world by storm. I am documenting how kanga textiles are featuring in the emerging Swahili fashion scene. Last year I attended the third annual Swahili Fashion week and saw many designers using kanga in their runway looks. This year, on the occasion of Tanzania's 50th anniversary of independence, the fourth annual Swahili Fashion Week will include 50 designers, an unprecedented amount for this event.

Additionally, I am tracing how kanga are becoming internationally recognized as markers of East African culture through their use in fashion designs. British chain stores like Top Shop and JOY carry trendy dresses made of kanga, and American designer label SUNO has made its fame from its use of kanga textiles. Even Michelle Obama has been seen wearing one of their kanga tops!

From their development in the late nineteenth century and continuing today, kanga have been popular items of dress and culture.

While they maintain their everyday role in women's lives in East Africa, kanga are also making headway into trendy closets around the globe, bringing East African culture along, too.



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