

The Global Reach of a Fashionable Commodity: Kanga Textiles in Dar es Salaam

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My doctoral research explores the global manufacturing and design history of industrially printed kanga textiles. Prima facie considered East African, kanga textiles developed through nineteenth-century global networks and have been imported since at least the 1870s, with industrial domestic production beginning only in the late 1960s. Various imported by Dutch, British, Indian, Japanese, and Chinese manufacturers, kanga textiles have maintained local significance for over a century as staple items of East African women's attire. Kanga textiles travel full circle in their more recent use as raw material for tailored garments, made for sale to fashion-conscious consumers the world over. My research seeks to document the history of these textiles by focusing on the international nature of their design and manufacture, their presence in historical and contemporary Dar es Salaam, and their subsequent journey to a global audience.

This past year, I completed dissertation research in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where I interviewed fashion designers, local women, textile designers, manufacturers, and sellers of kanga. I visited factories that manufacture cotton cloth and print kanga textiles, interviewed their designers, and explored samples of their textile production. I analyzed archival sources, including governmental, manufacturing, and import records, to ascertain the network of players involved in the textile trade over the past century and a half.

I collected mid-twentieth century kanga textile designs from one especial interviewee: Mr. K. G. Peera. Known locally as "Miwani Mdogo" (Swahili for "Little Spectacles"), he was just two months' shy of 100 when I spoke with him. Mr. Peera communicated much about the mid-century textile trade in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar and is responsible for a crucial shift in my research. Sadly, he passed away shortly after I interviewed him, but his son gifted me some of Mr. Peera's most prized possessions: his kanga designs, a suitcase full of which was the only thing he brought to Dar es Salaam when fleeing revolutionary violence in Zanzibar in 1964. I donated some of these designs to the British Museum and contributed Mr. Peera's life story, with photographs of both Mr. Peera and his designs, for inclusion in curator Christopher



Spring's most recent publication, *African Textiles Today*, released in October, 2012.

I continued my dissertation research in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands in spring 2012. I accessed manufacturers' business records and extant design pattern books in the Manchester area and throughout London. I consulted the unmatched collection and company archives of Vlisco, a Dutch textile printer, which possesses over 5,000 historical kanga, dating between 1895 and 1974, as well as priceless sample pattern books from the turn of the twentieth century.

In addition to dissertation research, I co-authored a paper with Dr. Sarah Fee (associate curator at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto)

on East African fashion for the first conference on non-Western fashion in Rabat, Morocco. I presented new research at the international conference on textile trades and consumption in the Indian Ocean world in Montreal, Canada. I have spent the remainder of my year writing my dissertation!

Mackenzie Moon Ryan is a PhD candidate in art history and a former FLAS fellow (Swahili, 2009-2011). This project was supported by the American Association of University Women, the Pasold Research Fund for Textile History, the UF School of Art and Art History, the Association for Academic Women, and the Madelyn L. Lockhart dissertation fellowship fund.