

Demystifying the “Exoticness” of the African Fashion Model

by Uduak Oduok

In 1976, Somalia’s Iman was the first African model and Supermodel in the USA to grace the cover of *Vogue*. Since Iman, each decade, the powerful American Fashion Industry has presented an African model that symbolizes African beauty, majority of whom are East Africans. For example, in the ‘80s it was Somalia’s Waris Dirie, the ‘90s was Southern Sudan’s Alek Wek and recently it has been Ethiopia’s Liya Kebede and Nigeria’s Oluchi Onweagba, the first West African model to occupy this position.

At the crux of the industry’s definition of African beauty is the following formula: “Exotic” and deep tragic tales coupled with fresh innocence and/or “exotic” features = The African Fashion Model. However, in an increasingly ethnically diverse national and global fashion market, it is critical the industry changes this formula as the title of “exoticness” compounds the complex issues faced by the African Model, is offensive and detrimental to her and the industry itself; and contrary to its stereotypes, the African Model is actually a national and global economic force to be reckoned with.

Caught in the middle of a fiery battle is the “it” African model who has to justify who the face of Africa is. Is the face of Africa Iman? Is it Alek? The American Fashion Industry believes it is both, but not other varieties. For example, an African model with chocolate skin, a full face and lips; and big brown eyes is probably not “African” enough for the industry versus one with a chiseled face, dark eyes, pouty lips and high cheek bones. As such, the industry projects the polarities of Iman and Alek to the world creating a bitterly contested debate among whites, blacks and Africans alike.

Indeed, when Iman emerged in the mid-late 70s, she created controversy as whites and most black Americans dismissed her as a “white woman dipped in chocolate.” Nevertheless, her controversy paled in comparison to Alek’s in the late 90s. Alek’s extreme features of jet-black skin, flat nose, round, puffy cheeks, deep set eyes and a shaved head evoked strong emotions from most. Whites called her unattractive and most Africans and Black Americans said and still say her look is offensive, a mockery to Africa and “plain ugly.” Worse, Alek’s fresh innocence allowed the industry to perpetuate caricatures and negative images of Africans as wild animals; as she was seen on fashion runways and photos in “exotic” makeup, bird feathers and leopard prints.



THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN TWO BODY IMAGES

Independent of being caught in the crossfire of who the real face of Africa is, the African Model is also caught in the dichotomy of two body images.

While this is changing, the African Model for decades has and is still viewed as an ugly duckling. The rationale is that she is “too tall” and “too skinny” for a woman. Africa and particularly African men generally view an attractive woman to be one that is shorter and plumper. In fact, some cultures within Africa sent and still send their shorter and plumper women to fattening rooms to get plumper prior to marriage; for large breasts and round hips allow the shorter plumper woman to be the bearer of children, making her extremely attractive to her husband. Thus, the phy-

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a bright pink two-piece outfit (crop top and skirt) and a necklace, stands in a courtyard. In the background, there is a sign for 'Coco Fine Art' and a large planter with red and pink flowers. The scene is set against a reddish-pink wall with a lattice pattern.

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New York based Malian Model Hawa Diawara
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sique of the African model is NOT African beauty.

In stark contrast, America views the physique of the African Model as attractive. Thus, in an almost Cinderella like story, once “discovered”, most African models go from being the ugly duckling to being the most beautiful girl/woman in the world. “I was extremely skinny and tall at age 17,” says the 6ft 2in Oluchi. “It was not funny at all. I remember [being called] all kinds of names, Lepa, Opeleghe and Pako [names used to taunt the “too tall” and “too skinny” girls in Lagos, Nigeria].” She adds, “I was a little insecure in comparison to my age mates who were shorter and curvier.” Luckily, she won South Africa’s “Face of Africa” model talent search, became a global phenomenon and put “too skinny” and “too tall” on Africa’s beauty map.

The Cinderella story would have a happy ending if America’s fashion industry is not plagued with the long-standing fight against anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

This can and does create some damaging self-esteem issues for the African model caught in the struggle of two body images; for she is too thin amongst her own yet, sometimes, is told she is not thin enough for America’s fashion industry. “Even today, I still face a lot of challenges when I go back home [Nigeria],” says New York based 6ft 1in model Agbani Darego who in 2001 was the first African woman to win a Ms. World title in fifty-one years. “People, my grandmother [and] journalist still say, ‘oh you are too thin you should add weight.’” she adds, “I’m like, ‘really? I may be too thin but just let me be. You know I won this way and I am happy this way.’”

POLITICAL UNSUNG HEROINE

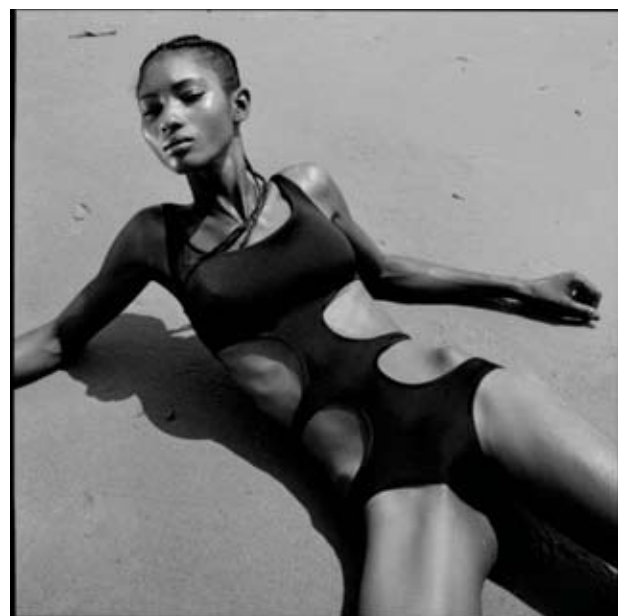
Added to the aforementioned issues, the African Model, especially those with tragic stories, are usually thrust into non-negotiated political roles that are generally heroic but dangerous; as they challenge the status quo. Examples of African model activists include Waris Dirie on Female Genital Mutilation and Alek on the genocide in Southern Sudan.

MORAL DILEMMA

The type of model assignments the African Model accepts is also an issue. NY based Malian model, Hawa Diawara, who is Muslim puts it succinctly, “it is against my religion to wear see-through lingerie or swimwear.”

Indeed, in America’s Fashion Industry, sex sells. However, African culture is steeped in religious conservative beliefs ranging from the Traditional African Religions to Islam and Christianity. So, for example, being selected by a client such as Victoria Secret to promote its campaigns might be an economically lucrative deal for the African model, but it can also create a major moral dilemma.

If she takes the lingerie assignment, then she has compromised her values and shamed her people as she is viewed as promoting “pornography” by her “naked” pictures and “prostituting” herself for money. Yet, if she rejects the deal, she might severely limit future assignments and her career potential.



New York based Malian Model Hawa Diawara
 Photographer: Ghukfvin

“EXOTIC” BEAUTY

The above complex issues are further aggravated by the title of “exoticness”. Being dubbed “exotic” creates a love hate relationship for the African Model. While her “exoticness” sells, it pigeonholes her into the “African look” or the constant pressure to fabricate or tell her over-told tragic story. Iman, when she first emerged, fabricated a story of being from the wild jungles of Somalia when she was in fact an educated daughter of a diplomat.

The “African look” created by the industry, permits it to continue to treat the African Model as a fad. Like a fad, she is chosen for her tragic story or extreme looks and quickly becomes an overnight sensation. Shortly after, her popularity goes down the tube as the industry pronounces her dead and informs her of the

obvious, “you don’t resonate with the average American woman, black or white. You are too “African.” The industry then reverts to the status quo, blonde hair and blue eyes.

ECONOMIC FORCE

Needless to say, the treatment of the African Model as a fad, a caricature or a charity case is negative and offensive. Further, the continued gambling against the African Model is a huge risk and bad economics for the industry.

Contrary to its stereotypes, the African Model is a national and global economic force to be reckoned with. As such, like her white counterparts, the industry must quickly wise up and reflect a variety of African beauties or else, face loss of billions of dollars in a fierce rapidly evolving national and globally diverse fashion market.

Within the USA, the economic force of the African Model can be seen in three key areas. First, her so called “exoticness” sells. As Leslie Asfour, a Fashion Expert and Instructor at Stockton’s Delta College in Stockton California, puts it, “Fashion follows the money.”

In today’s American fashion industry, the cult of American celebrity worship both nationally and internationally has made the American fashion model almost obsolete. Hollywood celebrity actresses and musicians have effectively bummed fashion models off covers of fashion magazines, advertising campaigns, billboards and so forth. However, the designer who puts the “exotic” African model on the runway, catalog or commercial knows that her tragic story and/or exotic look sells in the sensational driven American media, thus allowing her to share the spotlight with these Hollywood celebrities. So, while the “exotic” African Model might have a short run, she is an effective marketing tool to brand the designer’s line, gain media recognition, and/or revive an otherwise dead fashion house.

She has the ability to harness the potential spending power of the growing American ethnic market as they can resonate with her experience as an immigrant and minority in the USA. For example, in 2000 the U.S. Department of Commerce conducted a study titled, “Minority Purchasing Power: 2000-2045.” The study showed that minorities [Blacks, Latinos and Asians] in the USA had expanded their purchasing power by 47 percent over the past 15 years. As of 2000, ethnic consumers averaged \$1.3 trillion in purchasing power. It projected that by 2015 that number will exceed \$2 trillion and ultimately reach \$3 trillion between 2030 and 2045.

She is also able to market to a niche but economically relevant group, Africans in the USA. Contrary to the dominant images of Africans on television: wild monkeys hanging off trees or malnourished AIDS stricken children with rotunda like stomachs and flat butts, the U.S. Census Bureau 2000 and the American Community Survey 2002 show that Africans in the USA are the most educated groups within the country, even surpassing Asians.

Further, they are urban and earn high incomes. As of 2004, the Bureau, among others, reports that Africans in the USA sent over \$1 billion to Africa, surpassing America’s current aid to Africa. Africans in the USA are young [60.8% are 20-49 years of age] and majority live in metropolitan areas making them easily accessible for fashion creators to market their products and services.

Globally, the African Model is the link that can help the industry profit from a largely ignored but relevant market, Africa.

Independent of its strong oil reservoirs, the infiltration of technology in Africa is gaining momentum and foreign investments in Africa. Asia, Europe and American companies like MTV are grabbing a big stake in Africa’s technology and entertainment industries.

The African Fashion Industry itself is in on the revolution. The 2000 US-Africa Growth and Opportunity Act [AGOA], which offers tangible incentives for African countries to continue their efforts to open their economies and build free markets, has helped propel the African fashion industry forward.

Using the continent’s rich textiles and fabrics, innovative and exceptional fashion creators such as South Africa’s Stone Cherie, Nigeria’s Deola Sagoe, and Senegal’s Oumou Sy, among others, through the help of the African Model’s Hollywood type celebrity status, within and outside Africa and her following of loyal fans, have renegotiated a new identity of the African as urban yet cosmopolitan; and in so doing, secured Africa a place on the world’s fashion map.

America’s Fashion Industry can gain the loyalty of the African



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model fan base and other urban Africans by using her, as middle woman and a fashion influential, to diffuse fashion to the more than 600,000,000 in Africa and as such rake in dollars in mind blowing proportions. To do so, however, means that the industry MUST demystify and redefine the “exotic” definition of the African Model to include respectful, positive and variety images that resonate with Americans and Africans alike. □