Africa's textile heritage is key to a sustainable future

Recently hosted and curated by Twyg and Imiloa Collective, the inaugural Africa Textile Talks 2023 gathered over 150 people to witness presentations, discussions and exhibition of sustainable textiles from across the continent, to map the way forward in practical and poetic steps.

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A purpose-drive Pan African conversation

Attendees came from Mauritius, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa representing roles all along the value chain. Merging the worlds of fashion and artisanal craft, with textiles being the middle ground, Africa Textile Talks 2023 celebrated and demonstrated support for the growing African textile ecosystem that acts with care for people and the planet.

In the opening address, Kenyan creative director and cultural producer, Sunny Dolat, referred to Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui, who once said, "Cloth is to the African what monuments are to Westerners."

This set the tone for Dolat's keynote on African textiles as vessels of memory, identities, and heritage. Dolat is the co-founder of The Nest Collective, a multidisciplinary collective living and working in Nairobi, Kenya.

In upcycling drive, SA designers give new life to Western fashion waste
Catherine Schenck 14 Jul 2023

Yvette Tetteh, Sammy Oteng and Kennie MacCarthy from The Or Foundation – a pioneering Ghanaian organisation – spoke about the need for a new justice-led and circular textile economy, based on their research into the international secondhand clothing market and work supporting circular textile solutions in one of the biggest secondhand markets in the
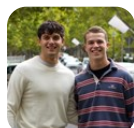
world, the Kantamanto Market in Accra.

Tetteh recently completed the Agbetsi Living Water Expedition – a 450km swim down the Volta River System in Ghana. During the swim, Tetteh and the research team collected water samples every day for their scientific research on microplastic and water pollution from fashion waste.

A deep dive into traditional and next gen textiles

On exhibit at Africa Textile Talks was a curation of textiles that are slow, considered, natural and kind to the environment. In many cases, these textiles can become pathways to a more circular, kinder world. The exhibition included innovative and age-old materials from industrially woven fabrics, hand woven fabrics from Sabahar in Ethiopia, recycled denim from Mauritius, upcycled textile waste from Madagascar and Nigeria, banana fibre from Madagascar, wild silk, ShweShwe, Kuba cloth, to Bògòlanfini (mud cloth).

Sappi showcased their climate-positive forest to (viscose) fashion process – from saplings to finished Tshepo Jeans garments. On showcase, too, was a visual farm-to-fashion display from Cape Wools, with samples of processed wool.

2 Matie students on a mission to make sustainable fashion accessible
6 Jul 2023

Included was a newly developed future-fit fabric made from pineapple waste brought along by Kenyan speaker and entrepreneur, Noreen Mwancha from Rethread Africa. Garments from Uni Form, Viviers, and Lukhanyo Mdingi were on show as examples of what the outcomes of caring, considered textile processes can be.

The Lukhanyo Mdingi spring / summer 2023 collection pays homage to the CABES Textile community in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. A short film screened at the Talks showcased this community's work and the connection to the Lukhanyo Mdingi brand.

"Our collective future depends on our ability to dissolve barriers and create shared solutions. Textiles are a medium for social change," says Jackie May of Twyg. The Africa Textile Talks 2023 was a catalyst in this movement.

In summary, Imiloa Collective's Priya Ramkissoon says, "The Africa Textile Talks truly showcased our commitment and vision to build a brighter and connected future. Our event was not only a celebration of the continent's achievements, but it also created a pan African platform for fostering sustainability, cross-cultural exchange, and the sharing of invaluable knowledge."