

# SOKKO

WITH LOVE

FROM KENYA

By Amy Fallon

Imagine this: you've never, ever strolled into a western clothes shop, never looked at a care label and couldn't identify a coat hanger if asked to. Yet, it's your hands that create the designs currently being worn by hundreds of women in the UK.



cowl neck dress £50



Printed jumpsuit £75

**F**or the 28 tailors at SOKO, the first globally recognised ecological and ethical clothing production unit in East Africa, the recent success of the brand's ASOS Africa line must have seemed a strange concept...

"I print off as much as possible to show them, because certain people made all of those styles," says director Joanna Maiden, who has successfully unveiled the AW range for ASOS after its February debut for Britain's biggest online-only fashion store. "For instance, Philip, the head tailor, made all the jackets, so Philip can look at the website knowing that he's made every one of them."

The 29-year-old name behind the brand did consultancy work for the Ethical Fashion Forum before leaving Britain and took on the SOKO project after first visiting Ukunda, a small Kenyan coastal town where the unit is based in November 2007. It was one of Joanna's contacts, Claire Hamer, a former Topshop buyer, who helped seal the ASOS deal. Claire, who had worked on small co-operative projects in Ghana, visited Joanna within the first month she arrived in Kenya. At the time she wasn't working for ASOS, but when she began working for the retailer, she pitched the idea of the Green Room, ASOS' online marketplace showcasing ethical brands. "When I went back to the UK, I met with ASOS... and they ran with it. Obviously it helped us that African print was on trend," Joanna explains.

Shirred, crocheted maxi dresses, cape-sleeved and batwing tops were just some of the pieces featured in the first ASOS collection, as well as pencil skirts, tailored trousers, playsuits, tie-waist shorts, blazers, and beaded belts, sandals and bags. "We made 300 printed paper-bag waist skirts," says Joanna, "It was the most popular item and ASOS placed a repeat order on the style, yet (the team) can't imagine that 300 people would buy the same skirt."

Even though the styles are dramatically different from what the locals in Ukunda get around in ("Over the knee, straight skirts" and clothes that "wouldn't show their shoulders"), the fabric used for the colourful, bold prints was the traditional East African Kanga. A rectangular piece of pure cotton cloth with individually designed patterns, Kangas are normally bought in a pair for about \$1.50USD, and often come with beautiful sayings in Swahili or English. "The thing that's really nice is that they only print

Stripe Maxi Dress £55



a certain number so there is a real chance of only getting the print for two weeks before it's gone," says Joanna.

70 percent of SOKO's profit is used to support local community projects, including the Mama Centre for disabled children, Ukunda Children's Orphanage and Shikamana School. The label has also set up a workshop within the Ukunda Youth Polytechnic and is running ongoing apprenticeship programmes in partnership with the tailoring department.

Unemployment in Ukunda, located in the Kwale District, is at a dramatic high of 50%. Anyone who manages to find work has to support eight other people. "I never imagined earning such a salary," says 45-year-old master tailor Philip, who lost his job and couldn't provide for his family after they were robbed at gunpoint in their home over a year ago. With the £40 SOKO gave Philip - half of the sum as a gift and the other half a loan - he has been able to rebuild his family's life. "My parents are very proud of me and I am setting a good example to my children," he says. "I can give them a good education now."

Joanna, who struggled to set up SOKO (She held Tupperware parties to raise funds after one critical financial backer pulled out last minute), says it's the commitment of Philip and others like him that keeps her going. "Philip is just unduly committed. Seeing someone really want to walk with you and work as hard as they can because they believe in it is really amazing. At times when it's really hard, I think about him and the others."



The ASOS AW range features a mixture of African prints and European fabrics. Also coming up is the Lalesso range for SS 2011. Lalesso, the fairtrade label launched in Cape Town in 2005 by Olivia Kennaway and Alice Heusser after they had visited Lamu Island, off the coast of Kenya, is incidentally the very label that instigated the start up of SOKO.

Already selling in the US and UK, SOKO's creations will soon reach Australia for the first time. They're also sampling for two other brands in the UK and US. "East Africa has produced a lot for the US," Joanna says. "Because of the recession, factories have had a big hit, so the US have realised they need to diversify." But the UK will not take orders as large. "I think for East Africa to become more relevant to the UK, they have to look at producing or taking on smaller orders, which is obviously what we do."

While the region may not be able to compete with China, India or Bangladesh - the world's low-cost textile producers - when it comes to price, Joanna says the 'story behind Africa' helps. "Africa is always in the press, relating to poverty and struggling industry, so it seems that more designers and brands are choosing it because they have an emotional feeling about it. Also, when they actually start to work with East Africa, they realise it can be competitive. It's really exciting and there's a lot more designers emerging. Africa will also keep coming through as a trend, which is obviously very helpful."

Meanwhile, it's up to us fashionistas to educate ourselves on ethical brands and buy intelligently. "Cherishing garments doesn't really exist anymore, it's all fast throwaway fashion that has so much to answer for," Joanna explains, "In terms of what people can do, be really conscious and spend a bit more - really know the story of where (garments) come from. And I think everyone can." **FAB**

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