



Fashion STATEMENT



Despite its diminutive size, The Gambia is bursting at the seams with sartorial talent. Lucky, then, that one fashion event is on a mission to ensure the world finally starts to take notice

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PHOTOS: KENNY EGBUKE, ANSU PHOTOGRAPHY, MAMOS PHOTOGRAPHY, STATE OF A/C

T

he diaphanous wedding gowns visibly shimmer in the modest showroom, their beads glinting like diamonds in the half-light. With the pieces' ornate embroidery and impeccable finishing, the dresses could well belong in a swish bridal

studio in New York or Milan. Instead, they're on display in the most unlikely of places – a nondescript fashion boutique in The Gambia.

Helmed by 31-year-old Margaux Ndure Tamedou, Phuzion is the country's go-to venue for blushing brides looking for something extra special. In spite of the boutique's bare-bones appearance, it's a household name and perhaps the most successful fashion label in The Gambia, even featuring on catwalks in neighbouring Senegal, and further afield in Nigeria and Ghana.

Granted, The Gambia is famed more for its pristine beaches and diverse wildlife than for its sartorial offerings. Yet in recent years, brands such as Phuzion are starting to get the acknowledgement they deserve, while the country is becoming known for having another asset: some of the continent's most talented fashion designers. And it's down to one event: Fashion Weekend Gambia (FWG), an annual fashion weekend held at the end of every year that is providing the much-needed stepping stone for the region's new breed of young designers, many of whom lack the resources to market their brands.

In fact, Phuzion launched at the inaugural edition of FWG in 2012 – a move that did wonders to raise its profile. "Phuzion was initially a part-time venture for me, but after FWG, the orders started streaming in," recalls Tamedou. "I decided to quit my job as a marketing and client-services manager at a software engineering firm, and focus on it instead."

Originally conceptualised as a launch event for a new clothing line called Tara Designs, FWG soon expanded – both in ambition and scale – into a fully-fledged fashion show. "At that time, it was mostly the older generation doing things with more traditional clothing," recalls



PHOTOS: KENNY EGBINE, STATE OF A/C

co-founder Lena Grey-Johnson. The entrepreneur wears many hats – a photographer and graphic designer by day, she's also today FWG's producer and creative director.

"We wanted to do something that could involve more young designers and create a platform for them," she explains. "We went all out – we had all these extravagant ideas, such as free food and drinks for everyone, and we invited all the designers we knew."

That amounted to a grand total of six. "The local fashion industry was much smaller back then," Grey-Johnson laughs. She was undeterred, though. "The first event turned out to be a big flop financially, but we just kept on going, trying to improve a bit every year, and we started getting more and more interest from designers."

Fast forward six years and FWG has come a long way. The next edition, held from 7-8 December at the Coco Ocean Resort & Spa, will see creations from more than 20

Previous spread, from left Alfa Cante; Yaws Creation; T-fa; Phuzion; Sega Designer; Ziza; Ziza; Alfa Cante; SND; Phuzion
This spread, from left Yaws Creation; Sega Designer; Sega Designer; T-fa; Timzy

West African designers, marking more than a threefold increase on the inaugural event. For the first time, it will also have an overarching theme: Afrofuturism, an aesthetic that explores the intersection between African culture and technology, and which entered mainstream consciousness earlier this year thanks to superhero blockbuster *Black Panther*. "We're hoping that designers will be really inspired and create some out-of-the-box clothes," Grey-Johnson enthuses.

However, the FWG team acknowledge that it's early days for The Gambia's fashion scene. "On a socio-economic scale, the industry is young," says human-rights activist Soma Njie, who became a FWG volunteer in 2013. "Unlike our neighbour Senegal, we have been quite slow to take creative work seriously and move fashion from a cottage industry to something that can change lives. The question of infrastructure comes up again and again. It's things like having access to financial support. Family expectations play a huge role as well. It's difficult to have your passion taken seriously, as something more than a hobby." ➤

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To this end, FWG regularly conducts capacity-building initiatives, working closely with participating designers and models to teach them the ropes of running a business. "There's such a huge need for assistance, whether it's things like writing proposals and visa applications to just building confidence as a brand," Njie says. "We're giving them a network – a family, so to speak. We want to bridge all those different gaps and provide a holistic platform."

But as Grey-Johnson observes, these structural challenges have proven to be a boon as well as a bane. "People might think it's bad that we don't have the machinery and infrastructure, but that's when you've got to be more creative. Sometimes, it works to our benefit," she explains. "Because we're such a young industry, there are no expectations and we can do anything."

Indeed, The Gambia's fashion scene is flourishing despite the odds, in large part thanks to FWG. Like Phuzion, local clothing label StarFit was one of the few brands that exhibited during the first FWG in 2012, and it's been enjoying stellar success ever since; it has even dressed local celebrities such as hip-hop artist Vypa and

Below, from left Modern elegance by Badjiz Design; Alfa Cante's striking swish; a traditional twist from Soboye

dancehall maestro Mighty Joe. The label rebranded as Medoune in 2016 (so named after founder Medoune Gaye) in a bid to appeal to a more sophisticated crowd.

Like Phuzion's boutique, Gaye's home studio is far from fancy. Instead, the spartan space is littered with swathes of fabric, several magazines and a single rickety sewing machine. But it's here that the former model dreams up his own unique brand of 'Afropean' apparel, marrying classic European silhouettes with African-inspired accents – think multicoloured trousers fashioned from Ankara (a cotton wax-print fabric) and a vermilion sheath dress embellished with a hodgepodge of cowrie shells.

Not content with being a mainstay at FWG, Gaye has plans for worldwide expansion. "Our aim is to take part in more overseas shows. We have already participated in LeNoir Creative Week in Stockholm, Africa Fashion Week in Amsterdam, and even did our own show in Eindhoven," he shares. "I'm trying to reach higher."

Gaye isn't the only one aspiring to take Gambian fashion abroad. In fact, one brand already has a sizeable presence in London – African-inspired streetwear label Jekkah, ➤

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Other brands to watch



Mixed Grill

This Stockholm-based, fair-trade label specialises in cheery kids' apparel, made in The Gambia. mixedgrill.se



Daraja

FWG's Adi Conteh crafts bags from sheepskin leather, Ankara and bogolan. [facebook.com/Darajaboutique](https://www.facebook.com/Darajaboutique)



Poema Jones

The artist works with Gambian weavers to create Rastafari-inspired statement headwear. thecoolruler.com

From left Perfect prints by Paja; Mora Fashion's simple silhouettes; lush velvets from Daraja

which counts celebrities such as Paloma Faith among its fans. Founded in 2013, it's the brainchild of former management consultant Petros Solomou and his business partner, Kamil Farage, whose family runs a textile business in The Gambia. "Kamil [who was my classmate] used to bring colourful wax-print pyjamas back to school in London from his holidays visiting family in The Gambia," explains Solomou. "They soon became popular enough for him to believe there could be a business."

In Jekkah's online collection, you'll find striking Afro-inspired prints adorning everything from *dashiki* (a traditional West African tunic) and loose trousers to bomber jackets and A-line dresses. "We do take inspiration from Western trends and appeal to European expectations of comfort," admits Solomou. "But we always keep a direct connection to the brand's roots in The Gambia." For instance, all of Jekkah's apparel is made in the country; Ankara fabrics are sourced from Gambian markets before being styled by a team of local tailors.

With Jekkah already flying the flag for Gambian fashion, Solomou believes that other brands will soon follow suit. "The Gambia is a very small country, but with events such as FWG, many local designers are growing in popularity," he affirms. "They will slowly but surely catch a break abroad... it's just a matter of time."

It's a sentiment echoed back in The Gambia. "I pray that one day, all of us designers will get on the runways of Milan, Paris and New York Fashion Weeks and sold in boutiques all over the world," reveals Tamedou.

For Grey-Johnson, the dream is for FWG – and African Fashion Weeks in general – to achieve the same recognition and status as the world's current biggest fashion events. "I would love to see FWG be a fixture in the international fashion calendar," she finishes. "We are still young, but we are building. It is our time."

fashionweekendgambia.com

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Where to stay

Kairaba Hotel

This five-star hotel may not have the panache of modern resorts, but it exudes a certain old-world Gambian charm. Sprawling across 40 acres of lush greenery and with 160 rooms housed in pastel buildings, it's a tropical paradise – guests might even spot the occasional peacock roaming the expansive grounds. Amenities



abound, too; you'll find a fitness centre, three restaurants, a spa and a pool on site, as well as the beach at your doorstep. kairabahotel.com



PHOTOS: KENNY EGBUKE



Plein la vue

En dépit de sa petite taille, la Gambie ne manque pas de talents dans le secteur de la mode, des créateurs aux organisateurs d'événements

La Gambie est un petit pays qui accueille pourtant un des événements mode majeurs d'Afrique, Fashion Weekend Gambia (FWG). Tremplin pour la nouvelle génération de créateurs de la région, FWG a été au départ conçu pour lancer la ligne de vêtements Tara Designs, avant de s'imposer comme un événement fashion à part entière. « On a tout donné. On avait ces idées extravagantes, traiteur et boissons gratuites et on a invité tous les créateurs de notre connaissance, se souvient Lena Grey-Johnson, productrice et directrice créative de FWG. »

La boutique de mariage Phuzion, avec à sa tête Margaux Ndure Tambadou, s'est lancée à la première édition de FWG en 2012, une décision qui l'a propulsée sur orbite. « Phuzion était une activité à temps partiel pour moi mais après FWG, les commandes ont afflué et j'ai décidé de quitter mon autre emploi, précise Margaux. »

Six ans plus tard, FWG a fait du chemin. La prochaine édition (7-8 décembre) présentera les collections de plus de 20 créateurs ouest-africains. Pour la première fois, il y aura un fil rouge, « afro-futurisme », esthétique à l'intersection entre culture et technologie africaines.

Grey-Johnson et son équipe concèdent que la scène mode gambienne en est encore à ses débuts. « D'un point de vue socio-économique, le secteur est plutôt jeune, dit Soma Njie, responsable du développement commercial de FWG. » Elle attribue cette croissance ralentie à un manque de soutien financier. Pour y remédier, FWG mène des initiatives de renforcement de capacité auprès de créateurs et de mannequins afin de leur apprendre le business. « Nous avons un énorme besoin d'assistance, qu'il s'agisse de rédaction de propositions et de demandes de visa ou simplement de renforcer la confiance d'une marque », explique Soma Njie.

Contre toute attente, le secteur gambien de la mode est en plein essor, grâce à FWG. Outre Phuzion, le label StarFit défilait à la première édition. Depuis, le succès est retentissant. StarFit a été rebaptisé Medoune (du nom du fondateur Medoune Gaye) afin de toucher un public plus sophistiqué. « Nous voulons participer à plus de défilés à l'étranger, dit Gaye. J'essaie de passer à l'international. »

Il n'est pas le seul à rêver de représenter la mode de Gambie au-delà des frontières. Le pays est déjà bien établi à Londres via la marque de streetwear Jekkah, fruit de l'association de l'ancien consultant en management Petros Solomou et de Kamil Farage. « Nous nous inspirons des tendances occidentales et répondons aux attentes européennes de confort, indique Solomou. Mais nous conservons un lien direct avec les racines de la marque en Gambie. »

fashionweekendgambia.com



Gambia maakt een statement

Het kleine Gambia beschikt over heel wat modetalent, van ontwerpers tot organisatoren van evenementen

Gambia is misschien maar klein, maar het is het thuisland van een van de grootste mode-evenementen van Afrika: Fashion Weekend Gambia (FWG), een opstapje voor de nieuwe generatie jonge ontwerpers van de regio. FWG was oorspronkelijk een springplank voor de nieuwe kledinglijn Tara Designs, maar groeide snel uit tot een volwaardige modeshow. "We hebben alles uit de kast gehaald. We hadden allerlei extravagante ideeën, zoals gratis eten en drinken, en we nodigden alle ontwerpers uit die we kenden", zegt Lena Gray-Johnson, producent en creative director van FWG.

Bruidsboetiek Phuzion, geleid door Margaux Ndure Tambadou, werd tijdens de eerste editie van FWG in 2012 gelanceerd, en dat deed wonderen voor haar bekendheid. "Phuzion was een parttime onderneming voor mij, maar na FWG begonnen de bestellingen binnen te stromen en ik besloot mijn vaste baan op te zeggen", herinnert Tambadou zich.

Nu, zes jaar later, is FWG sterk geëvolueerd. Tijdens de volgende editie (7-8 december) worden creaties van meer dan 20 West-Afrikaanse ontwerpers voorgesteld. En voor de eerste keer wordt een overkoepelend thema gebruikt: Afrofuturisme, een esthetiek waarmee de kruising tussen Afrikaanse cultuur en technologie wordt verkend.

Gray-Johnson en haar team erkennen dat het modewereldje van Gambia nog in de kinderschoenen staat. "Op sociaaleconomische schaal is de sector vrij jong", zegt haar collega Soma Njie, die de bedrijfsontwikkeling van FWG leidt. Ze schrijft de langzame groei toe aan een gebrek aan financiële steun.

Daarom voert FWG initiatieven voor capaciteitsopbouw uit, door met ontwerpers en modellen samen te werken om hen de business te leren. "Er is erg veel hulp nodig, van het schrijven van voorstellen en visumaanvragen tot het opbouwen van het merkvertrouwen", legt Njie uit.

Ondanks alle belemmeringen gaat het dankzij FWG goed met de mode van Gambia. Naast Phuzion exposeerde ook het label StarFit tijdens de eerste FWG, en sindsdien geniet het groot succes. StarFit is ondertussen omgedoopt tot Medoune (vernoemd naar oprichter Medoune Gaye), om een meer verrijnd cliënteel aan te spreken. "We willen graag deelnemen aan meer shows in het buitenland", zegt Gaye. "Ik probeer het merk naar een internationaal niveau te tillen."

Gaye is niet de enige die streeft naar internationale bekendheid voor de Gambiaanse mode. Gambia is al behoorlijk aanwezig in Londen dankzij streetwear-label Jekkah, het geesteskind van voormalig managementconsultant Petros Solomou en zijn zakenpartner Kamil Farage. "We halen inspiratie uit westerse trends en spelen in op de Europese verwachting van comfort", zegt Solomou. "Maar we houden altijd een directe link met de roots van het merk in Gambia."

fashionweekendgambia.com

