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Rebranding Africa

By SUZY MENKES

Africa is in the news — but not just for the sad and familiar reasons of conflict and suffering. The continent is entering the fashion arena, with the quality of its handwork, artistic creativity and its potential for economic growth bringing Africa literally in vogue.

The key word for an overall résumé of changes in attitude and perception is “rebranding.”

“They are not my own words — they come from Nigeria’s president, Goodluck Jonathan — but I do believe in the ‘rebranding’ of Africa,” said Franca Sozzani, editor in chief of Vogue Italia, which has devoted this month’s men’s wear issue to the continent.

The May Uomo Vogue is an all-Africa magazine with images of beauty and grace far removed from violence and poverty. And the magazine’s cover features an unlikely figure: Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations.

Inside the magazine, an interview with Mr. Ban contains an impassioned plea to move Africa away from bad news toward positive thinking.

“Africa does not need charity — Africa needs investment and partnership,” said Mr. Ban. “Joining forces with civil society and private sector, including non-traditional players, like the fashion industry, has become indispensable. Sustainable development is my top priority.”

Ms. Sozzani did an “all black” issue for women’s Vogue in 2008, and she has subsequently promoted multiculturalism with a focus on black creativity and beauty on the magazine’s Web site, Vogue.it.

Ms. Sozzani’s personal commitment helps to dispel any idea that rebranding Africa via fashion is a gimmick or that it might sit uncomfortably beside the deep-set issues of poverty, disease and gender.

The editor has been appointed a Goodwill Ambassador for Fashion4Development — a global campaign that uses fashion-based initiatives to support the United Nations’ wider issues in helping Africa.

On a recent visit to Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda, Ms. Sozzani met with Africans working in the design field from creative fashion through product development and film.

For Ms. Sozzani, “positivity” is the key word in taking an uplifting attitude to a nation where “the image is so low.” She wants to present in her magazine an Africa that is “creative and confident of its own strengths. ”

But most of all in the May issue, she wanted to celebrate images of individual elegance and style.

“All the pictures are made in a glamorous way — there is nothing sad, trashy or poor,” she said. “People may say that Vogue does not want to talk about sickness and poverty, but if we can give an uplifting image, it is helping people who would not have considered Africa at all.”

The concept of small projects leading to an upgraded image includes not just people, but place: the lush beauty of the country and its allure as a tourist destination.

There is also “Nollywood.” The cinematic creativity of the continent ranks alongside Hollywood and India’s Bollywood in terms of cinematic output: 1,093 films are produced on average in Nigeria each year, compared with 555 in the United States, according to a 2011 Unesco study.

But the emergence of Africa as a source of fashion creativity is about more than elegant images. The continent’s craft work, varying not just between countries but also to specific tribes, offers to a jaded fashion world objects that have been touched by human hands — the greatest of luxuries in a 21st-century world.

Textiles are another important area, even if production is shifting toward China. However, fashion weeks across the continent are drawing attention to African style locally and globally.

The enthusiasm of a young generation to build careers in Africa rather than emigrate has encouraged Fashion4Development to be optimistic. In the last decade, African economies have grown at an impressive rate, with several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa rivaling growth rates in countries such as China, India and Brazil, according to the World Bank.

Aside from any idea of encouraging investment in the creative professions, Ms. Sozzani hopes that her joyous Vogue celebration will help to bring a shift in attitude.

“The whole issue is packed with portraits of local personalities: not just presidents, first ladies and queens, but also artists, singers, musicians, actors, stylists, writers, models,” she said. “Every one has been portrayed in a positive light. They all agreed to take part in the issue

precisely because presenting a positive image of the continent means focusing world attention on an area that has been hitherto excluded.”