

EAST AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE

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ABSTRACT

Background: The East African cultural industries face many challenges including visibility in the international design scene. In fact, there is a myth that there's 'nothing' happening artistically in Kenya or East Africa and a lie that has to be debunked that the only art forms in the country are curios often called souvenir or airport art. Surprisingly, there are still some Africanists who continue to perpetuate this lie. They still claim the only contemporary African art of merit is to be found in West and Southern Africa. And even now, when the global media is highlighting the surge of intense interest in Pan-African art, they are still largely ignoring East Africa. (Gacheru, 2017) **Problem:** East African contemporary furniture has not been represented in the international design scene. Many international design shows and exhibitions feature euro-centric designs and ignore Afro-centric designs. This has been a major challenge for East African artists as well as consumers. **Objective:** This paper aims to explore East African contemporary furniture, establish the challenges and opportunities in the creative and cultural sectors in East Africa and investigate artists groups as a means of supporting the creative and cultural sectors in East Africa. **Design:** Using desktop research this paper will determine and analyse findings on East African contemporary furniture. **Setting:** The study was carried out in Nairobi, Kenya. **Subjects:** The study will focus on Jomo Tariku a designer who was born in Kenya to Ethiopian parents, who has become a successful industrial designer specializing on East African Contemporary stools and chairs. **Results:** The study will highlight one of the biggest challenges that a black designer faces: visibility. The study will also demonstrate how the underrepresentation of black artists and designers in the international design scene affects both the designer and the black consumers. Finally this paper will demonstrate how Jomo Tariku was able to overcome this major hurdle and assist other black artists experiencing the same challenge. **Conclusion:** This study concludes that East African contemporary furniture is indeed more than the application of maasai shuka upholstery or animal skins but is a sophisticated blending of the culture and heritage of East Africa with ergonomics and industrial design principles to create products that must be represented in the international design scene. Through the formation of artist guilds and associations, designers can overcome the challenge of visibility and gain access to many other benefits.

Keywords: Three-legged chair, three-legged stool, guild, black artists and designers, visibility

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Furniture market in East Africa has been largely dominated by imported products. The East African economies consume US\$1.2 billion worth of furniture annually, of which 22 percent is imported (US\$268 million). Since growth is driven (and bound) by growing urban populations and purchasing power, growth prospects are favorable, and Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda are likely to remain the dominant furniture markets. Among these economies, Kenya usually takes the lion's share of the market even though its urban population is smaller than that of Ethiopia and Tanzania. Kenya is the largest market for furniture in East Africa and it is also the largest producer of furniture— manufacturing twice as much as Ethiopia, the next biggest market. (The World Bank, 2013)

The government of Kenya through the 'buy Kenya build Kenya' policy has upended the domestic furniture industry as it is the single largest market. Small and medium sized companies in Kenya who sell custom-made furniture are growing rapidly as a result of the government initiative. The major challenge to the local industry is high competition from cheap imports from Asia. Other challenges include the economic destruction caused by COVID-19, high costs of raw materials, high costs of energy and high costs of production in the country that makes locally made products expensive and therefore less competitive. Tougher tax measures on imported furniture and implementation of the 70 percent purchase of locally made furniture are some of the recommendations to the government to spur up demand for Kenyan-made furniture. (Mwangi, 2021)

Traditionally, furniture was made by highly skilled craftsmen who learnt the trade by apprenticeship. Furniture was mostly made of wood and wood working tools were very minimal. The three-legged stool is one of the most common piece found among most of the people of East Africa. Currently the three-legged chairs and stools are treated more like art in the west yet they are functional pieces that can be found inside many homes. Jomo Tariku is an industrial designer who having grown up with these pieces in his home, decided to riff on this tradition in a completely new way. The designer's sculptural pieces are artful, comfortable and wholly unique therefore redefining contemporary East African furniture. (Keller, 2020)

Most cities associated with craft industries established guilds sometime during the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. A guild served three main functions: promoting the social welfare of its members, maintaining the quality of its products and protecting its members from competition. This usually meant defining quite carefully the materials and tools that a guild member was allowed to use to prevent activities that infringed the privileges of other guilds and for which they had not been trained, for example a carpenter producing wood sculpture. (open university, 2020) In East Africa, artists seem to be 'voiceless' and uncoordinated partly due to poor organization. Their associations are weak, fragmented, disorganized and in some cases non-existent hence might not be equipped to engage the government in a constructive manner. Better organized, knowledgeable artistes would be able to pile pressure on the government to adopt artist friendly policies. (Hivos people unlimited, 2016)

2.0 THEORY

2.1 East African Contemporary Furniture Design Exemplar; Jomo Tariku



Jomo Tariku, Source: (Curkin, 2019)

Jomo Tariku is an industrial designer who was born in Kenya to Ethiopian parents, and is currently based in Virginia. Tariku originally moved to the United States in 1987 to earn his undergraduate degree in industrial design at the University of Kansas. (the Forklore, 2020) His signature work consists mainly of three legged chairs and stools, which he loves for the challenge they pose. “Ask any designer what’s the most difficult thing to design, and they say a chair,” he says. “I want to rise to that challenge and respond to it. Can I do that unique chair? Can I get the ergonomics right as an industrial designer? Can I do something that is producible, that’s still challenging to make?” says Jomo in an interview by House Beautiful. (Keller, 2020)



The nyala chair and stool inspired by a mountain antelope by the same name. Source: Padova, 2020

As a young boy, Jomo was always drawing, sometimes he was not even conscious that he was doing it. He'd be daydreaming in class and the next thing he knew his history book would be covered in sketches. Jomo's father traveled a lot for work, and he'd bring back artifacts and decorative pieces from all over the world: copper trays from Zambia, tusks from the Congo. Tariku would spend many hours sketching the objects in his home from different angles. They left a strong impression on the designer which is evident in his functional pieces. At the point Jomo Tariku did not recognize that there was something called design that he could make a living at. (Padova, 2020)

All Tariku's designs go back to his culture. It's what inspires him over and over again. For Tariku, the question is, how can he synthesize these things? What story can he tell here that hasn't been told before? (Padova, 2020) He did not feel the urge to create another Scandinavian or mid-century chair, he argues that "Why would I want to add myself to that collection, when I have an extremely rich heritage and culture that I can build my design expression on?" (Keller, 2020)



The MeQuamya chair that was inspired by the prayer staff used by the Ethiopian orthodox church in their rituals. Source: Padova, 2020

Jomo Tariku began his studio together with partner in 2008 however due to a recession the market was not as ripe as it is now. This led his them to shut down their studio and pretty much walk away from it all. He began working as a data scientist for the World Bank in Washington DC, a job that he still keeps today. In 2017, Tariku launched Jomo Furniture to showcase his latest line of sculptural chairs and stools. He was inspired to do contemporary East African furniture after noticing that at the time there was barely anything like that on the market. There was only the Eurocentric thinking of what African furniture was, be it an animal print on a couch or a tribal mask. Things tourists buy when they go to Africa. But Jomo wanted to do something different, informed by his heritage and the craftspeople of Africa but using new materials and new technologies. His college thesis was to design a line of modern African furniture, and really he has been pursuing that ever since.

Jomo's design process starts from rudimentary sketches that he enhances with multiple versions of refinement. Once he gets the sketch to a place he likes, he does a digital 3D model to see if it translates into something that's visually well-balanced. From there he can assess how he may prototype it. He likes



The Ashanti stool which is a reinterpretation of a traditional Ghanaian stool. Source: Padova, 2020

to do the first prototype himself, but sometimes he is limited, especially if the chair has many complex parts and he does not have the tools to produce it. When that is the case, Jomo takes the design to his builder, a man named David Bonhoff, and they will work on a few iterations before moving to the final piece.

The biggest hurdle that Jomo has faced as a black furniture designer is visibility. Jomo has been attending trade shows for a long time and has observed that not only is there a lack of Black designers, but also who he is as an artist wasn't expressed in anything he sees there. An Italian or Scandinavian designer will somehow weave their culture and heritage into their work. It still has to be ergonomically designed, but in the end one can look at a piece and say, that is Italian or that is Scandinavian. But if one goes to some of the largest furniture design events in the world, it is rare to see anything informed by a Black culture. It is like black designers are invisible.



Different variations of the Nyala chair. Source: Padova, 2020

This also has an effect on Black consumers. Design can be very personal for people. When one is decorating their home they are making a statement about who they are. There is some connection between a person and the things they put around them. As a Black person it's much harder to make that connection because we don't see our culture represented. Jomo Tariku's goal has always been to create objects that have depth and meaning to him as a designer but also, hopefully, to the person who buys it, places it in their home, and maybe someday passes it down to their children.

Jomo Tariku tried to quantify the underrepresentation of black designers in the industry having encountered several people who denied that black designers were underrepresented. Jomo conducted a search in the top major design companies — the trendsetters that everyone emulates — to see how many Black designers they actually employed. Though he could not get into their internal databases, he was able to scrape the data from their webpages. He admits that it wasn't the most scientific approach, but even after applying a one- or two-percent margin of error, the numbers are still really, really bad. It's like they don't exist. Jomo didn't do anything with the data until he got invited to Princeton University to talk about Black design and he presented my findings. Then, when the Black Lives Matter movement took off and people started demanding answers, his study got picked up by media outlets, including the New York Times.

In 2018, Jomo along with a handful of independent artists and designers, helped start the Black Artists + Designers Guild. This is an organization that advocates for more inclusivity in the design industry by investing in black ancestral futures, claiming liberatory black narratives and creating spaces to celebrate black creativity and culture through art and design. (Black Artists + Designers, 2021) One of the guild's central missions is to mentor the next generation of Black artists, makers, and designers — tomorrow's up-and-comers.

2.2 Results of Joining the Black Artists + Designers Guild

Other than connecting with other black designers, Jomo has been approached by various industry people from all corners, including ELLE Decor. He has recently been invited to be part of a curated furniture show at a museum—which was unthinkable to him earlier on. He is collaborating with designers from Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, the United States and Canada. Jomo gets invited to be a panelist at design events and give speeches — things that simply did not happen before. He is also being exposed to the younger generation of designers. The guild helps members get more access to the industry so that their work can be seen. (Curkin, 2019)

Countries that have vibrant arts and culture industries also have the industry players organized into associations and guilds that help improve standards, harmonize compensation for artistes, and serve as platforms for learning. They can also engage the government or other sectors with a united front so as to pile consistent pressure to have their concerns and needs addressed. The current state of associations in East Africa is that they are fragmented, disunited and lack a common consistent agenda of how to engage the government and different industries to ensure that the standards in the industry consistently improve as do the lifestyles of artists in the sector. Artists seem to be 'voiceless' and uncoordinated partly due to poor organization. (Hivos people unlimited, 2016)

3.0 CONCLUSION

The East African furniture market has an opportunity for the introduction of authentic furniture that can represent the culture of the East African market through the eyes of the East African people. Far from the well-known Maasai shuka, beads and animal skins there is more East African heritage that a designer can explore to create contemporary East African furniture. Designers and artists can come together and form groups that would enhance their visibility and credibility in the market and with the government.

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