

The SA Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU) is dismayed that - as reported in media today - international brand Zara appears to have appropriated the designs of South African homegrown talent, the inspiring local designer Laduma Ngxokolo and his brand maXhosa. If this is true – and it is certainly suggested by the ‘coincidental’ stylistic overlaps between some Zara products and ma Xhosa’s iconic designs – it would represent the worst form of fashion colonialism: the extraction by global retail powerhouses, based in the developed world, of intellectual and cultural heritage from far less powerful designers based in the developing world. This cultural appropriation represents so much of what is wrong with the fashion industry specifically, and with global power relations more generally.

Big fashion retailers have little regard for ‘the little folk’. They simply treat the world as a resource to be exploited to benefit their inspiration and ultimately their profit. Culture, designs and styles are reduced to fair game that can be poached or cut-and-pasted as they wish - the more so if these designs are considered exotic, other and traditional. There is no sensitivity to the origins of designs, their context, their history, their meaning, and the power relations between the retailer and the object of their interest. Instead design and culture are seen as purely commercial, and are pursued with imperialist entitlement.

But the problem with the appropriation of maXhosa’s designs goes beyond culture and politics. It may also have a material and negative impact on the brand too. After all, maXhosa’s designs are the lifeblood of a small boutique brand which has, appropriately, used its cultural capital to find a niche, a foothold, in a very contested and challenging market. However now Zara’s tactics threaten to undermine this niche, not only because consumers can now purchase similar mass-produced products made by Zara, but also because Zara’s maXhosa knock-offs will themselves be knocked off by other retailers around the world who regularly cut-and-paste Zara’s every move. The damage to maXhosa will be exponential and global.

If Zara has indeed appropriated maXhosa’s designs, they are unfortunately unlikely to care. After all, SACTWU has tried since last year to get Zara’s parent company, Inditex, to understand that its presence in South Africa is causing damage to local factories, and we have sought to get them to agree to procure goods from South Africa to remediate the damage they are causing. But the company simply refuses to make such an agreement. It seems they are comfortable acting like colonialists – simply exporting the money they make in South Africa to Spain (their headquarters), causing damage to local factories and factory workers, and now stealing some of our cultural artifacts for good measure and damaging a niche designer along the way.

Nevertheless SACTWU once again calls on Zara to work with our local design talent and the local manufacturing industry to grow jobs in our local fashion industry.

Issued by

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<http://www.sactwu.org.za/news/533-sactwu-condemns-the-appropriation-of-maxhosas-designs-by-zara>