



# GENERATION NEXT

MEET THE AFROPOLITANS, AFRICA'S TRANSCONTINENTAL CHILDREN

WORDS YOLANDA SANGWENI PHOTOS DOROTHY HONG

OPPOSITE PAGE  
FROM LEFT:

**TUMA BASA**

AGE  
33  
OCCUPATION  
Director of music programming, MTV (US)  
HERITAGE  
Rwandan  
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT  
Born in Congo; raised in Zimbabwe and USA

**IBRAHIM NDOYE**

AGE  
32  
OCCUPATION  
Marketing manager for Boudoir D'huîtres fashion house in NYC  
HERITAGE  
Senegalese  
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT  
Born in Dakar; grew up in Brussels and Paris

**JEFFREY KIMATHI**

AGE  
32  
OCCUPATION  
Founder and designer of Jamhuri Wear in NYC  
HERITAGE  
Kenyan  
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT  
Born and raised in Nairobi; lived and worked in Frankfurt, Lisbon and Brussels

**T**hese certainly aren't your National Geographic Africans." When Kenyan artist and Brooklyn resident Wangechi Mutu described the South African ska-punk band Blk Jks, who stormed New York's now-defunct Zipper Factory last summer, he could also have been referring to the arty-party Africans who crowded the tiny theatre that night. We watched as lead singer Lindani Buthelezi glided his lithe frame across the stage, his hair unkempt in the tradition of rock musicians. He sang in a sulky drone reminiscent of Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke, and his skinny jeans, black t-shirt and Converse All Stars indicated that he was at once a skinny African kid from the township, and now a moody rock star.

Coverage in the right kind of magazines has garnered the band the kind of buzz New York's too-cool-for-school hipsters, black and white, are quick to notice. It's also caught the

attention of well-heeled young Africans who now call the city's five boroughs home – for some of them a permanent home, for many a stop on a transnational journey to more cities around the world. And though you won't find the Africans at a Blk Jks gig wearing the traditional garbs of their homelands from head to toe, you will notice an aesthetic – one that has now evolved a name: Afropolitan.

The term can equally apply to Blk Jks. No one appears to question why a bunch of black kids from Soweto would gravitate towards rock and metal and fuse it with traditional South African styles such as township jazz or maskanda. The band's cheeky mash-up of musical styles reflects their own Afropolitan cultural experience: the root is African, but it doesn't end there.

The Blk Jks' performance was courtesy of New Africa Live, a music showcase started in 2007 by four globetrotting friends from various parts of the continent, who have taken the Afropolitan idea to heart and collectively call themselves Afropolitan Society. There's the MTV music programmer Tuma Basa

(Rwanda via Congo via Zimbabwe via Iowa), a talkative 33-year-old who loves all things hip hop. There's Ibrahim Ndoye (Dakar via Brussels) and Jeffrey Kimathi (Nairobi via Lisbon via Frankfurt), who both work in fashion (Ibrahim as marketing manager for design house Boudoir D'huîtres, Kimathi as the founder and designer of Jamhuri Wear, a line of African-inspired streetwear worn by the likes of Akon, Damian Marley and Jay-Z, and featured in ARISE Issue 2). And there's Somi (Rwanda via Illinois via Tanzania), a jazz vocalist with two albums under her belt.

But where did the word Afropolitan come from? The Afropolitan Society founders first found the phrase in a much-circulated article by New York-based Ghanaian-Nigerian writer Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu in 2005. In it, she describes an urban African recognisable



**TAIYE  
TUAKLI-WOSORNU**

AGE  
29  
OCCUPATION  
Writer and budding fashion designer  
HERITAGE  
Nigerian and Ghanaian  
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT  
Born in London; raised in Boston, Massachusetts; lives in New York


**MENSOR  
KAMARAKE**

OCCUPATION  
Fashion director of  
Vibe magazine  
HERITAGE  
Sierra Leonean  
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT  
Born in New York;  
has lived in  
Moscow, London  
and Freetown

by a “funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes.” This generation, Tuakli-Wosornu wrote, is the offspring of the “young, gifted and broke” students who left Africa in the 60s and 70s in search of new opportunities – some willingly, others forced into exile. “We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world,” she boldly declared.

For some, the article and its famous phrase stood as an informal cultural manifesto for a generation of kids who grew up as equally influenced by their African heritage as by the West – the sons and daughters whose musical tastes are likely to include Afrobeat alongside hip hop, soukous, R&B and jazz. For them, Afropolitan is an affirmation of an identity they have long sensed but never expressed. And Afropolitan sensibility is not limited to cities outside the continent. You’ll find it in the newly emerging Afro-chic clothing lines popular with

South African urbanites in Johannesburg and Cape Town, or in the evolving tastes of trendy Nigerians who frequent Chinese and Tex-Mex restaurants in Lagos, and even among the crowded salsa dance classes that are popular in Nairobi. Its outlook is expressed in the works of the Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye, the electro-pop of Ethiopian-born singer Kenna, the lyricism of the Nigerian-born British novelist Helen Oyeyemi, and the acoustic soul of the Nigerian singer Asa.

“The first time I heard the phrase, I was like, ‘Wow, this is beautiful. This is me,’” says Jeffrey Kimathi from his design studio in Harlem. “I was always looking for something to call myself and this just explained my experience and who I was.” Though raised in Nairobi, Kimathi spent time living and working in Lisbon and Frankfurt before settling in Harlem in 2001. He knew a few people in the city but had little urge to search out only other Africans, he says. “I always had this sense that although I was African, I was a global creature, so the people I surrounded myself with had to reflect that – or else, why move to New York City?”

He started Jamhuri Wear two years later, after stints working as a stylist at MTV and

interning for urban fashion house Ecko Unlimited. His ‘I Africa NYC’ tees – in which an outline of the African continent replaces the ever-popular heart logo of the iconic ‘I love NYC’ tourist t-shirt – were the hottest statement on New York streets last summer, transforming what started as an apartment operation into a full-on design house.

Tuma Basa, Kimathi’s friend, had a similar reaction to the word Afropolitan. “It just hit me right there and then. I was like, ‘This is me. This is half of my cousins, and a lot of my friends,’” he says, before describing his extensive global footprint. “My family is originally from Rwanda, but I was born in the Congo. I left there when I was five years old to come to the States, and then for my primary school years we moved to Zimbabwe, so I did all my high school and a little bit of university in Zimbabwe, before coming back in the 90s to live in Iowa City.”

As a teenager, Basa would toy with labels such as Halffrican and Geografican to describe himself, even going as far as calling his imaginary autobiography *Forever Foreigner*.


**VINCENT  
OSHIN**

AGE  
36  
OCCUPATION  
Stylist and DJ  
HERITAGE  
Nigerian  
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT  
Born in Nigeria;  
raised in  
Newcastle;  
has lived in  
London and  
New York



“I would ask questions like, ‘Do you have to physically be in Africa to be an African? What if your heart is in Africa? Are people in Africa the only ones who have a full claim on the continent?’ And I said, ‘No, I’m an African. This is my reality and I’m gonna bring my flavour, my home, my continent to this new reality.’ Like any immigrant kid, Basa found himself trying to fit into a mould of what he thought was expected of an African and an American boy, both at the same time, and never got it quite right. “I always had to learn to exist on the inside from the outside, no matter which society or culture I joined,” he says. “It wasn’t a struggle, it wasn’t uncomfortable or inconvenient. It was just my reality.”

Afropolitan Society was not started “just to party and bullshit,” says Ibrahim Ndoye. As well as organising New Africa Live sessions, which draw a mix of fashionable young Africans with disposable cash, Afropolitan Society wants to make a difference back in Africa. “We thought it would be a great place for people to meet and have a good time,” says Ndoye. “But from a cultural point of view, we also know it’s a chance for us to give back to Africa. We’re young, we’re African, and we have skills and resources.

“The word Afropolitan just hit me right there and then. I was like, ‘This is me. This is half of my cousins and a lot of my friends’”

Why wait for people like Bono to do it?”

“The people who heard it from me think I coined the term [Afropolitan], but I can’t imagine that I was the first person to think of it,” says the writer Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu, 29. She is sitting in her Harlem apartment, decorated with a kaleidoscope of Gustav Klimt and Salvador Dali prints, neatly displayed with paintings of African masks and fabrics. With her modelesque frame and torrent of black curls, you’d be forgiven for mistaking this London-born daughter of a Nigerian mother and Ghanaian father for a Tyra Banks hopeful, rather than an Oxford-educated cultural arbiter. “I was really surprised by people’s reaction,” she says. “It’s always great when

someone can see his or her experience in your work. That, more than the popularity of the term, was what was so meaningful to me.”

It all began when a magazine editor asked the then grad-student to submit a piece for an Africa-themed issue. “He wanted me to write about things like post-conflict resolution in West Africa and the future of oil,” she says, adopting a look of mock dismay. “I thought, ‘But we always do that!’” Instead, she wanted to draw from her own experience of growing up in London and Boston with her Yoruban paediatrician mother and African-American stepfather, with reference to her biological father, a Ghanaian who lived in Saudi Arabia.

“You’re going to school with Jewish kids but coming home to a house where Yoruba is spoken and only Nigerian food is served, and you’re spending every Christmas in Accra. So, like it or not, you do end up with a hybrid identity,” she says. Hence the phrase


**MOBOLAJI  
DAWODU**

OCCUPATION  
Fashion stylist  
and designer in NYC  
HERITAGE  
Nigerian and  
African-American  
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT  
Born in the US;  
grew up in Nigeria

**ISOLDE  
BRIELMAIER**

AGE  
36  
OCCUPATION  
Art curator and  
professor  
HERITAGE  
Ugandan and Austrian  
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT  
Born and raised in  
Seattle; has lived in  
Kampala, Nairobi  
and Johannesburg



Afropolitan. "Anyone who has lived through that kind of experience can identify with what I'm talking about," she adds.

In New York, a city of immigrants, the experience that Tuakli-Wosornu and Afropolitan Society describe cannot be claimed by Africans alone. If anything, it is a consequence of globalisation and urbanisation. But somehow it stands as a generational shift of sorts, a breaking away from the past. It's no secret that African parents have traditionally held a tight grip on their children's lives and professions. There are the oh-so-familiar stories of parents urging their children to become a doctor, lawyer or accountant. Or those unavoidable (and often comical) abominations masked as lectures on the dangers of becoming too British, too American. But an Indian, Chinese or Jamaican acquaintance can easily relate to (and share a laugh about) these anecdotes.

“It's a consequence of globalisation and urbanisation, but it also stands as a sort of generational shift, a breaking away from the past”

"What I'm most excited about is our generation's ability to change and get away from this pre-ordained career path set up by our parents, in order to be seen as achieving some sort of success or influence," says Vibe magazine's fashion director Memsor Kamarake, who is Sierra Leonean but was born in New York City and grew up in London. "But even my decision to choose my own path is due to the choices my parents made. I thank them over and over again for their hustle." In his tenure as fashion editor, Kamarake says he has made a conscious effort to put more African, particularly Sierra Leonean, models in the pages of Vibe. "I'm so proud to be called African," he says. "Even though I wasn't born there, mine is a very African point of view."

Perhaps Afropolitanism is also a way of

preserving the African point of view, while rescuing Africa from the imagery conjured up when people on the outside think of the continent. In New York, where everybody has a scene, it's also a way to create an aesthetic that people will be drawn to, and build a community around it. "If a marketeer were to target Asian Americans in the city, for instance, he'd know exactly where to go," says Ndoye. "Even though [Afropolitans] are similar to African-Americans, we're different – and not in a bad way. There are just many dimensions to us."

But not everybody is buying into the whole Afropolitan thing. The Nigerian-born stylist and DJ Vincent Oshin says: "I just don't understand the necessity of categorising Africans. It's all words to me. One week it's metrosexual, the next it's Afro-punk. Yes, I'm an African who grew up abroad, but I don't need a term to define me. I am who I am." Oshin was raised in Newcastle, in the north-east of England, and has been living in New York for eight years. On the turntables he spins

the likes of Fela Kuti alongside the little-known Linda Lewis, a black British singer. "At the end of the day, music is music and people are people," he says resolutely.

The contributing style editor of The Fader magazine, Mobolaji Dawodu, who has styled Outkast, Wyclef Jean and Kelis, shares the sentiment. "I'm just an African, man," he says. "When you're at the airport in Australia, nobody's looking at you like, 'Oh you're an Afropolitan, you're different. They just see an African. Some people are born in the village, others in the city. That's just the African experience.'" Part of his African experience was growing up with a Nigerian father and an African-American mother in Virginia, "with a name like Mobolaji and eating strictly rice and stew everyday," he adds with a laugh.

Hlonipha Mokoena, 32, assistant professor of anthropology at Columbia University, has her own theory about the Afropolitan concept. "It's liberating in that it frees you from having to define yourself by ethnicity or a particular experience," she says. "You define yourself like, 'I'm a citizen of the world.' Politically, I think Afropolitanism is a way to say we can no longer see ourselves as involved in some sort of

anti-colonial, anti-imperial struggle. It's a way to create new hope and a vision for the future."

Though weary of labels, Ugandan-Austrian art-museum curator Isolde Brielmaier is eager to expand the definition of Afropolitan. "It shouldn't be just about those people who got on a plane, but also those who move in terms of their interests in culture, music and economy. Whether they're moving from Mali to Chad or Senegal to New York – it's about people who move within these spaces and across these spaces." Isolde grew up in Seattle, surrounded by American culture as much as by German and African. "People see I have this über-German name and they're like, 'Yo, I need an explanation. What's going on here?'" she says, laughing. "Yes I grew up in the United States, but my cultural upbringing is definitely informed by my [Ugandan] father's culture."

In a way, the Afropolitan sensibility Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu describes is evident in the Harlem neighborhood she and 26,000 other Africans call home. Near her apartment is the

vibrant Le Petit Senegal (Little Senegal), an inner-city bastion of everything West African, from traditional restaurants such as Africa Kine, selling egusi and dibi, to contemporary bistros such as Les Ambassades, serving French-West African cuisine. The area is also home to Bebenoir, a trendy boutique founded by the Guinean designer Ibrahima Doukoure. As well as selling up-and-coming African designers, the shop hosts music showcases by new artists such as British-Nigerian soul singer Siji. You'll also find this Afropolitan fusion in swanky downtown venues such as Merkato 55, a pan-African restaurant in the Meatpacking District run by Ethiopian-Swedish celeb chef Marcus Samuelsson.

"By saying Afropolitan, we're not creating some make-believe movement," says Basa. "You can find examples of it all over the city. It's a consciousness that acknowledges the worlds we live in, as well as our origins." ●