

African Identities

A few years ago, the term ‘Afropolitan’ came to define a modern movement in creative realms from fashion to literature. Then came Afropeans, Afro-optimists and Afropreneurs. *Wings* explores the ideas and subcultures defining an era. WORDS Belinda Otas

What does it mean to be African or an African living in the diaspora? What about the daughter or son of African migrants born outside the continent, many of whom feel a strong sense of affinity to their motherland? It is a complex and complicated process even to assert the exact number of Africans living outside the continent. The World Bank estimates that over 30 million Africans fit into the category. It is no wonder, then, that at a time when we live in a world of instant global media reach on a 24-hour basis, with Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms readily at our fingertips, the discourse about African identities continues to evolve and be reconstructed. Hence, terms like Afropolitan, Afro-Optimist, Afro-Klectic, Afro-Phile, Afro-Centric, and Afri-Capitalist - if Afro is a noun, then all you need do is type it into Twitter search - AFRO - and an array of adjectives that extend beyond the above list will gladly welcome you to a world of identity creators in a cluttered space of online chaos. The Afros are growing (pun intended), aided by a savvy generation living in a new-media village.

‘Afropolitan’ was first coined by the Nigerian-Ghanaian writer, Taiye Selasi, 31, who was born in London, raised in Boston, and studied at Yale and Oxford University, but resides in Rome. It was a term described as “a new-generation trans-national/trans-Atlantic African.”

In her 2005 essay, *What Is An Afropolitan?* Selasi wrote: They (read: we) are Afropolitans - the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss... There is at least one place on the African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or

an auntie’s kitchen. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world... Perhaps what most typifies the Afropolitan consciousness is the refusal to oversimplify; the effort to understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honour what is wonderful, and unique. For us, being African must mean something.

Today, things have gone beyond Afropolitan. It is about African identities, at home and in the diaspora, and from a multiplicity of perspectives that includes the career paths of our candidates, and the various places their life or work has taken them. We explore why Africans of different generations are more willing to explore new forms of identity, and what this new fervour adds to the African narrative.

AFROPOLITAN

Taiye Selasi, 31

Writer, author, dancer, photographer and documentary filmmaker



Ultimately, most people who do anything do so because there is some aspect of personal experience that keeps nagging. In my case, it was to do with this question, where are you from? For about 20 years, I was content to just bumble through the answer when I was asked but it always struck me that people would be dissatisfied with the answers I gave and would say things like: “Wow! West Africa, did you live there? Have you lived there? Where were you born?” I had ended up feeling like I had an identity that was somewhere in the crack; this unconventional, national, cultural identity.

There needed to be a new way to think about this - who I was and where I came from. This very kind of self-contemplation led me to ‘Afropolitan’ because it just seemed that I could not, well, myself and my twin sister could not possibly be the only people, who struggled with this question.



In *Afropolitanism Is Not An Exclusive Identity*, I wrote about what an Afropolitan is based on my experience. I was delighted and surprised that it was an experience shared by so many others, and it's why I believe my article was as widely disseminated as it was. I didn't write it to say 'you are this' or 'you are not.' Rather what happened is that, those who saw themselves in the experience, my experience signed up saying, yeah that's me. I have articulated what I think is a shared and salient identity and one that's somehow squeezed between much larger rocks, but I don't feel a sense of responsibility or claim any authority, and it would be ridiculous to start telling others that they can or cannot relate to the concept.

Afropolitanism is encouraging a fresh look and a shift in the discourse. I do think there is a sort of global discourse with the internet, Facebook and all the social media outlets that we have. Afropolitan is the African person who is not herding goat and this is not to say goat herding is bad. But the image is always of the goat herder, when we know all too well that there are different images of the African. I'm delighted to see the fact that just the idea of Afropolitanism has pushed us a little bit past that. Something has to change, break in and push in to remind us that there are smart thinking people and there are hopeful people with shoes.

I always say criticism is wonderful, it should happen. I think no one thing is everything and if anyone works up the courage or is just stupid enough to come up with something that is specific, there will always be those who say 'what about this?' and 'what about that?' The idea that you have to be living in an opulent suburb to consider yourself Afropolitan is inane because that's not how I grew up. What I want to say is that it's good when people start throwing rocks at an idea and if people feel the need to defend it. Because if it can stand up, we know there is something. It's generational for me more so than it is economic. I recently started the photography project of my dreams,

"twentysomethingfiftyfour," travelling to all 54 African countries. To anyone who would say that Afropolitan applies only to those Africans living outside of Africa, I would say: get thee to a salsa congress in Accra, a film festival in Ouagadougou, a drag race in Lome. Youths on this continent are as globally minded, culturally curious, and dazzlingly creative as youth anywhere else. If not more so.

AFROKLECTIC

Gillean Opoku, 23

Digital designer and founder of Afroklectic.com, a compound word of – 'Afro' and 'Eclectic'.



Growing up in Australia, I submerged myself in Ghanaian culture. I always went to Ghanaian parties and community events and an African church and was very curious about it. I would always ask my parents questions about culture and customs just so I was in the loop. But at the time I tried to identify as Australian. It was only in high school that I realised I'm a combination of both but it doesn't equate to 50 percent Ghanaian and vice-a-versa Australian. My identity is a blurred line. Sometimes I'm on one side more than the other. My African identity is important to me because it defines who I am. When I was a lot younger, I tried to reject that side of me but realised that when I looked in the mirror, I'm African. I cannot run from that. I need to embrace it. My first time in Ghana was in 2004 and it was life-changing. I was last there in 2011. This may sound clichéd, but I'm in tune with my roots.

The journey to Afroklectic started when I was searching for something that could be a platform for African creatives like myself, to showcase their work – A space to share ideas, experiences and take note of what others are doing in Africa and the diaspora. I'm a designer and thrive on visuals. However, after doing





research, starting a blog seemed to be the best way to develop the idea and for the name, I wanted a word which reflected creativity, diversity and Africa. I have always loved the word 'eclectic'. I love the way it is spelt and its meaning. 'Afroklectic' came to mind and everything just clicked. It encompassed everything I was trying to do and I have not looked back since 2010. I wanted Afroklectic to be that point of inspiration and creative contact, the hub for Africans over here. To date, the response has been amazing. The most awkward being, "Wow, I didn't know there are black people in Australia", to fellow Australians commending Afroklectic for opening them up to a different side of the Australian community and Africa.

AFROPHILE

Meruschka Govender, 32

Tourism specialist and fourth-generation Indian born in South Africa, who identifies first and foremost as African.

 I identify as a South African of Indian heritage rather than an Indian-South African. I have travelled in India and feel a lot closer to Africa. I may look Indian but my soul is African. I came across the term Afrophile about a year ago, but have identified with being an Afrocentric/Afro-positive person much longer. I identify with it because in my view it means someone who is proudly African, Afro-positive and is proud of things associated with African culture. Africans come in many colours; black, white, and everything in between and in my opinion, being African is not a question of race. I have grown up in a time when young Africans were not proud of their African identities and were always looking to the West for role models. That's why I think my African identity is important. We need to be proud of ourselves.

Identity is not something that's easily categorised and identifying as an Afrophile is not necessarily limited to a cultural or travel movement. It's an extension of my African identity. We have multiple identities. I'm passionate about travel in Africa. My first independent travel experience was when I was 23. I backpacked from

South Africa to Mozambique and Malawi. It definitely influenced my way of thinking and opened up my horizons, and I realised how diverse and beautiful Africa is. I want to use it to change the narrative that the world has about the continent – Africa is not homogenous. There are many countries, cultures and multiple stories. Let's get beyond the 'pity Africa' phase.

AFROPOLITAN & AFRO-OPTIMIST

Lulu Vanessa Kitololo, 30

Designer and creative director



I left Africa 12 years ago and have since lived in the US and UK. Leaving home made me truly think about where I come from. I describe myself as an Afropolitan and Afro-optimist because it's great to have these aspirational words that bring like-minded people together, towards a positive end. Especially when you live in a space where there are few people like you and perceptions about you and where you come from are often skewed. In this day and age it's really sad to see how beaten down our African psyches are – by non-Africans, and yes, by each other. For me, 'Afropolitan' and 'Afro-optimist' are labels to rally behind in terms of rediscovering our worth and asserting it. I believe that everything starts with the self. You cannot change the world if your house is not in order. And it starts from the innermost chamber –



you the individual, then your community, and your country. Becoming 'the other' has forced me to reflect about why I'm the other, what it all means and how I can respond to it.

My African identity colours everything about me and flavours everything I do, and certainly feeds into my work as a designer. Being an Afropolitan is more about open-mindedness; a willingness to learn, a proactiveness and desire to improve your lot. The beauty of the term Afropolitan to me is that it's all about a mix of experiences and interests. When we talk of Afro-optimism, this is something I've felt since before I left the continent. I grew up with my father who is such a patriot and I think it rubbed off on us kids. These identities don't only exist in reaction to something. That is to say – I'm not an Afro-optimist because of all the Afro-pessimism that's daily broadcasted in too many ways – although this gives me more conviction. I'm an Afro-optimist because I believe in our continent's great capacity for creativity, innovation and heart, despite the growing pains. I want to complicate Africa. I want people to realise how multi-dimensional the continent and the experiences of its people are.

AFROCAPITALIST

Tony Elumelu, 49

CEO and founder of Heirs Holdings, and one of Africa's leading philanthropists.



Afrocapitalism is a new approach to doing business in Africa that will help create economic prosperity and social wealth on the continent as well as revolutionise Africa's economic identity on the global financial stage.

The term is a call to the African private sector to invest for the purpose of catalysing economic development that will lead to prosperity and social wealth. We believe that businesses should do well and the communities where they operate should do well simultaneously. In the past, it used to be that business would do well, and then begin to think of how to give back to society. Let us synthesise – do well and do good simultaneously. Case in point, if you are into oil production. It brings a lot of financial wealth but most times, the communities they are based in complain about environmental issues. So we are saying you can do good by satisfying commercial interests, while making the community better. So, instead of flaring gas if you have an oil asset, you can produce oil, then convert the gas to fertiliser. It's capital-intensive but at the end of the day, the fertiliser helps farmers, so you make more money, you're not polluting the environment and you are hiring people from the community to get involved.

Africa is not yet plugged into the global economy. But that unique identity could actually reposition or position us as truly a good destination to invest in. Afrocapitalism is not about direct government intervention; it's about what the private sector does. For the private sector to perform, it must sit in the right environment that the public sector creates. What has happened in the past three to four years shows that Africa is truly the right continent. The call to Afrocapitalism will actually transform the economic life of Africa if successful. Genuine business people, embrace long-term investment and factor it in a way and manner that will factor in the social and environmental issues into the way we do our



business. So that ultimately, it is a win-win situation for everyone.

CHEETAH GENERATION

Marième Jamme, 38

Co-founder of Africa Gathering, a blogger, technologist and social entrepreneur. She uses technology to influence Africa's identity on the world stage.



Born in Senegal and based in London, I see myself as a very passionate African, who loves technology and wants to use that to help change things on the ground. In 2011, I wrote a piece for the Guardian UK, where I talked about the 'Cheetah Generation.' I want to make a difference between migrants and expats. Many of us came to the West out of frustration, among other reasons. People like the economist Dabisa Moyo are highly qualified individuals who can change the continent. They are extremely hungry and have one foot here and one in Africa, trying to change the continent to become a better place. For me as an African woman, it's very important to give a voice to African people through my work. Africa Gathering was born out of that frustration. We went back to our roots thinking about the ways our grandparents used to sit down and discuss ideas in villages and we thought if we did that with technology, we can help people to understand the continent better. It is a platform for us to come together, share our ideas and learn from each other like the Chinese and Indians do, while working together. We are tired of the older generation leading Africa and that's why we have the Cheetah Generation who are hungry for change, are diverse and want to make good changes on the continent. We need these people to get together, have a clear conscience about what they want to do and take action for Africa. They are the future of Africa as far as I am concerned.