

Glocalisation

by Silvia Bombardini



Mati Ventrillon

They called it *dochakuka* in 1980s Japan, a portmanteau of *indigenous* and *transform*. Originally an agricultural policy for farmers to adapt their techniques to different localities, the idea was found at the time to perfectly suit the radial diffusion across Asian territories of customised J-Pop. Still, it's the aptly vague textbook definition that sociologist Roland Robertson penned in 1997, of glocalisation as "*the simultaneity – the co-presence – of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies*" that allows for the moral ambiguity the notion retains to this day. In the 21st century, we've come to resign ourselves to a globalised world: with its homogenous comforts, anglicised vocabulary, eerily colonial patterns. In this reality, the wilful effort of a transnational corporation to meet regional taste, like McDonald selling McBurritos in Mexico or Starbucks green tea cheese pies in China, could almost come across as considerate. It's instrumental instead, and crude if not patronising, as it dumbs the local culture down to a stereotype. Though often worryingly effective from a marketing perspective, corporate glocalisation will always be artificial, because it's implanted. Thankfully, that's not the only kind of glocalisation there is – a much subtler process can be so spontaneous, and such a natural aftermath of globalisation, that the problem could even be said to carry within itself its own resolution. An optimist's point of view

surely, but the logic is sound: *“at least as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenised in one or another way”* writes Arjun Appadurai in his seminal essay *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*. When foreign trends are reinterpreted by, rather than for, local communities and individuals, that’s how glocalisation lives up to its true potential. Not just as a relief from the numbing sameness globalisation got us used to, but as a positive model for the increasingly multicultural world we live in. One where cultures no longer clash, but harmonise, and we can be inclusive and exposed while keeping true to our own heritage and uniqueness.

The internet is both a great example of this cultural shift and played a key role in the still relatively brief history of glocalisation. Initially an exclusively anglophone milieu, flattened further by the simplified imperatives of programming language, the *web* was born as an agent of globalisation. But it could only really do justice to its *world wide* title if it integrated multiple alphabets and sensitivities, and from there, it organically outgrew its sterile uniformity to become a fertile ground for many diverse communities to bloom. Like virtual localities, these forums, chatrooms, social networks, gaming or dating platforms, each developed their own glocal lingo, rules, system of values. Espousing the most globalised of all movements, the digital revolution, these cultural groups were able to not only preserve but develop and strengthen their singularity, by easily reaching for kindred souls from the remotest corners of the planet.

In fashion theory, talks of glocalisation would generally refer to the corporate kind, relating in particular to the pointedly dubbed McFashion megabrands of the high street. Occasionally a matter of product, as it’s the case for instance with Zara’s, it’s more often than not a marketing strategy. It’s how Nike projects on the Asian market a softer brand image, less brash or aggressive than it does in the US, and online fast fashion retailer Missguided would focus on speed of delivery in America, but quality when selling in France. It’s also why European tourists visiting the Philippines may find themselves drawn to glocalised Uniqlo stores – so used are we to our globalised brandscape, that a comfortably familiar experience could almost be perceived as exotic if ever so slightly tweaked. But at the other end of the spectrum, also the opposite happens: thanks in great part to the web, local labels throughout the world can cultivate an awareness of global trends that would have previously been impossible outside fashion’s circles, then blend them with tradition to pique the interest of both fellow countrymen and an international crowd. In fact, the furthest they find themselves from the four fashion capitals, the better. Because at the same time as globalisation and social media allow glocal fashion a chance to be seen, renowned luxury labels become less desirable due to their excessive accessibility, a phenomenon for which the same factors are vastly responsible. Paradoxically, western fashion forgoes its supremacy in a globalised, but not westernised, world.

Of course, globalisation has made its way into our wardrobes, with little care for the preservation of local customs and independently even from our spending power. That’s not to say that they would be now

interchangeable. Rather, subtle discrepancies are all the more evident on a standardized tableau: different weathers, different faiths, rhythms and priorities, all tamper naturally with the way we conform. And what we wear when, or how we choose to, may still reveal more than we think about our cultural identity and motherland. Take colours, for instance – while red stands for joy in Asia, it means danger in Europe, and if a bride in the West would wear nothing but white, one in the East certainly wouldn't. Our clothing become more complex, layered with signifiers. At the same time, a sense of reawakened pride compels younger generations, usually the most keen to drift away from the past, to familiarize themselves once more with forgotten customs, blow the dust off traditional clothes. It's true that fashion designers have long been fascinated by folk costumes, especially from countries other than their own and often causing perplexities among those communities they found themselves enamoured with – communities that in recent years have more and more often been able to speak up, or type up, against the controversial issue of cultural appropriation. And there's still a long way to go, if we just think of the Kikuyu textiles and Masai beading in Valentino's *wild Africa*-themed spring collection. But it's this sense of pride driving young people towards them that hints to a radical change of attitude, one that may have stemmed from the digital revolution too. For digital natives, spatial distance has crumbled, miles are immaterial. Almost as a balancing force, comes the urge to locate their roots. It stimulates civic consciousness, engagement on a community level, and together with the demystification of western fashion, a proliferation of fashion weeks around the globe that no longer mimic foreign trends but celebrate glocal style.

"I think of tradition as continuation that changes and adapts", says Mati Ventrillon, "it is innovation in a creative or technical form that can maintain the interest of the consumer and the craftsman. How are we going to attract future generations to continue working with traditional skills if they don't offer an opportunity for growth and development?" Her philosophy, and especially her knitwear, tick all the boxes of an admirable case of glocalised fashion in Fair Isle. Grown up in Venezuela, the designer moved nine years ago to the most remote inhabited island in the United Kingdom, learnt and mastered the precise skills required to knit on a hand-frame knitting machine, as custom wants it, her famously bespoke Fair Isle jumpers. And she might be willing, according to her client's wishes, to compromise somehow on the motifs – but still uses only local wool and when each piece is finished, Mati washes it and leaves it to dry on a picturesque wooden stretcher, the traditional woollie horse. On Fair Isle, she's a role model of civic virtue, from training as a firefighter to tending to the island's communal flock of sheep. Abroad, the popularity of her craft certainly received a boost after Chanel publicly apologised for some sweaters in its Métiers d'Art show, which resembled a bit too closely those that representatives from the brand had purchased from Mati a few months prior. It was on social media that she called them out on it, and Chanel's amends, along with an endorsement of the dedication and talent of Fair Isle knitters, could easily benefit the islanders just as much as the Prince of Wales' choice of wearing one such jumper as he was being painted in 1921. *"My whole business depends on the internet", she confirms "I see it as a tool of engagement, communication*

and trade". Indeed, Mati Ventrillon's online waiting list, that was 18 months long when she spoke with The Guardian in December, is still closed due to high demand. There where luxury labels, like Chanel perhaps, might suffer the backlash of extreme accessibility, Mati's closed waitlist makes us covet her sweaters all the more.

The web as a helpful, progressive global influence, could have even more of an impact on a new generation of designers in their formative years. Vaquera for example, one of the upcoming DIY labels in a close-knit, mutually supportive community that's taken it upon themselves to freshen the New York fashion scene, was born two years ago when founder Patric DiCaprio purchased on Amazon his first sewing machine, and proceeded to teach himself how to use it with cosplay tutorials. In an interview with Dazed, he recalls growing up in Alabama, where he wore the same uniform to the same private Christian school for some fourteen years: a uninspired environment for sure, but in hindsight, also the one that with its monotony made him more aware of the details, the students' little touches of personality, of defiance. *"I began to rely on the Internet as a source of stimulating new ideas"*, Patric told Vogue and ultimately, he relocated to NYC. Since his label's debut, Patric staged his winter show in the subway, turned to a church for spring, and most recently, a Chinese restaurant in the Financial District: more than just a backdrop, the city, as a local influence, provides him with context.

Beside sewing lessons and international orders, another way for designers to benefit from the internet is in terms of prestige. Slippery and unpredictable as it is valuable, the respect of esteemed and virtually incorruptible online ambassadors, niche blogs and experts, can earn cult status to a glocal brand, especially if coupled with limited availability. This is what happened to Hiroki Nakamura of visvim, one of the most successful examples of fashion glocalisation in modern-day Japan. Like many of his fellow countrymen, Hiroki turned his admiration for post-war, pre-globalised American workwear into an art form. It's an oddly widespread phenomenon among designers in the country: the same culture crush that begun with James Dean wearing jeans in *Rebel Without a Cause* and led to Japan becoming the world's apex of denim artistry. High-quality workwear manufacture begun to disappear in the United States when American companies started to look for cheaper labour abroad – at the same time though, Japanese enthusiasts kept the craft alive in their homeland, perfecting it with their renowned patience, meticulous finishing and local dying techniques. The resulting hybrids are unique items that now appeal not just to local Japanese customers, but to American ones who find themselves missing the artisanal flair of yore. Sometimes, their production may sound indulgently fanciful: like Momotaro's G001-T Gold Label jeans, which are said to be handwoven on a loom that weaved once kimono silks, then washed in the water of the Seto Inland Sea. The final garments however, are hardly ever flashy: discreet, looking almost ordinary, they're feats for connoisseurs. True to the practical, simple and easy allure of their inspiration across the ocean, the only way they might be challenging is in terms of price. The production process is what makes them unique – as the visvim

website puts it, Hiroki's brand embodies a methodology, more than a single style. According to vogue.com, for instance, the unassuming checked dress in his spring 2016 collection was actually dyed in the traditional *katazome* way, that should involve a sticky rice flour resin applied through a stencil and later brushed with dye.

Traditional workwear, from all around the world in her case, also inspires the work of young designer Hala Kaiksow. From the small island country of Bahrain in the Middle East, just last month Hala was presented in London with the 2016 International Fashion Showcase (IFS) Designer Award, by illustrious fashion critic Sarah Mower. Among the references for her collection, Hala, who recently graduated from a Master in Collection Design from Polimoda in Florence, mentions a shepherd's jacket from Iran, a sailor's Aran jumper from Ireland, and a Japanese peasant's patched boro kimono, proving once more how little distances matter in the modern world. On the local side, her own Arab heritage is promoted with the use of traditional techniques: the designer looked into Bahraini palm and cloth weaving, and the carpet-weaving skills of Berber women. *"To take root in tradition and bring it into the greater fashion conversation is very important to me"*, she says. But heritage is also respectfully challenged, for example when cultural garments like the thoub are re-appropriated with a subtle, though decidedly cosmopolitan shift from mens to womenswear. *"I needed to give the garments relevance and make them modern enough to speak to the audience of the current global world"*, Hala adds *"it's important to speak about gender"*.



Xuly.Bët in Vibe magazine, 1993

Meanwhile in America, the preservation and prosperity of artisanal techniques and cultural heritage is the ambition of VOZ. Meaning *voice* in Spanish, the New York-based label collaborates with native artists,

mainly women, in rural South American communities like the Q'ero weavers in Peru or Mapuche in Chile. "Textiles are critical vessels of cultural identity", says Jasmine Aarons, VOZ's founder and CEO "the heritage craftwork of each culture is like DNA". Ethical labels with a social agenda have multiplied in recent years, but what makes VOZ another great example of glocalised fashion is the equilibrium it appears to have reached between this paramount respect for centuries-old traditions and the promise to integrate, in careful doses, only the measure of innovation necessary for them to live on. This generally means technological support, trend awareness, or the use of softer materials that would more easily appeal to luxury customers abroad. And global markets are thought of as key for the local craftsmanship to survive: according to Jasmine, the reason why these artisan groups are endangered to begin with, is that their local marketplace has been swamped with cheaper knockoffs. "In order to compete, artisans feel pressured to lower their prices by simplifying their designs", she argues "When symbols disappear from the public array of heritage crafts, it becomes harder and harder to remember or teach them".

The flood of affordable, poorly mass-produced clothing from the Far East, and just as well, lest we forget, second-hand garments brought in by charities from Western Europe or North America – and occasionally, clothes that were first cheaply made in the East, purchased and briefly worn in the West, and then given to charities to export – undoubtedly comes as a double-edged sword for poor communities in emerging markets, where a local textile industry might not get a chance to develop at all. And yet, it is perhaps in these localities where the homogenization that we worry about most of all reveals itself as illusory, where glocalisation most naturally follows. Familiar clothing in unfamiliar places absorb local meaning like cultural sponges: the quintessential example of this, in anthropology studies, is always the case of the t-shirts of the Asmat people, in Papua. An indigenous ethnic group traditionally clad in nothing more than grass skirts or kotekas, when t-shirts came to reach Papuan shores their effect on the local culture was much more innocuous than one could think. Surprisingly ingenious even: as proved in an ongoing ethnographic study that Dutch artist Roy Villevoeye begun in the early 90s, this notorious article of globalised fashion had been adopted and adapted by the Asmat people to suit their own heritage. Fastidiously ripped, shredded and torn in patterns, theories have linked the alteration of t-shirts with the elaborate woodcarving tradition of the Asmat, or the scarification patterns on their skin. This glocalisation of western fashion that happens further down the line from the usual cycles of production is also notable in many African countries where the second-hand clothing business thrives. According to *Clothing Poverty* by Andrew Brooks, 81% of all garments purchased in Uganda are second-hand, and they're called *sola* in Congo, meaning *to choose*, *salaula* in Zambia as *to select from a pile in the manner of rummaging*, and *mupedzanhamo* in Zimbabwe, *where all problems end*. But the way they are worn locally is so different from the way they were worn in Europe, from the colours that are favoured to how an outfit is combined, and mended rather than binned, that we easily speak of a glocal *salaula* culture of its own, endemic to the region.

It can also happen, though admittedly it's still quite the rare occurrence, that these glocal practices will find their way back into high fashion, even Paris, the cradle of haute couture. That was the case of Malian designer Lamine Kouyaté, who in the early nineties, riding the wave of the deconstruction movement, launched in the French capital his brand Xuly.Bët – meaning *open your eyes wide*, in Wolof. Lamine's West African upbringing, and the local inventiveness when customizing second hand clothes from abroad, came to inform his design sensibility: one distinguished by recycled flea market finds and mass-produced surplus clothing, chopped and patched together with coarse wool stitching. *"A sweater arrives in one of the hottest moments of the year"*, he recalled from his childhood in a 1993 interview with Vibe magazine *"so you cut the sleeves off to make it cooler"*. The one-of-a-kind nature of such garments, and their visible handmade quality, put Xuly.Bët on the same level of Paris' more traditional couture labels, and earned it both the New York Times' Creator of the Year award in 1994, and the ANDAM award in 1996. After a couple of decades of laying low, the brand made its comeback in New York for spring 2016, guerrilla-style like back in the day, right outside Anna Sui's show. Lamine had also designed a capsule collection in collaboration with the Afropunk festival last summer, and in time for the winter 2016 season, Xuly.Bët had its own slot on the NYFW schedule.