

The rise of Afrocentrism and its impact on the luxury business

By  Lauren Hartzenberg

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Africa has been a rich source of artistic inspiration for many parts of the world for centuries, but what's changing now is that Afrocentric culture is being defined, spearheaded and dispersed by the sons and daughters of the African continent.



Uche Pézard speaking at the CNI Luxury Conference in Cape Town. Image credit: Heather Shuker

Africa has one of the youngest populations in the world, a fast-growing middle-class and rising incomes across the continent, and therein lies a tremendous market opportunity for the global luxury and fashion industry. But the Afrocentric luxury opportunity also includes the wider African diaspora.

"The Afrocentric population worldwide is more than two billion people whose shared cultural codes, collective consciousness and inclusive influences are defining their relationship to luxury both inside and outside Africa. Understanding them is key to luxury success in Afro societies."

These were the words of Uche Pézard, CEO of The Luxe Corp Group and founder of Luxury Connect Africa, when she spoke at the Conde Nast International Luxury Conference in Cape Town last month.

What does it mean to be African?

"How many people here would raise their hands if I asked 'Do you love Africa'," Pézard asked the room of delegates gathered from around the globe. "What about if I asked 'Do you love Africans?' Is loving Africans part of your love for Africa? Do you know Africans? Can you love somebody that you do not know?"

The luxury business strategist and entrepreneur said that while Africa's population is 1.4 billion people, the “real” population of Africans both in Africa and around the world is approximately 2.6 billion people, scattered across more than 120 countries. “This is the Afrocentric Africa that holds enormous opportunities for the luxury industry,” she said.

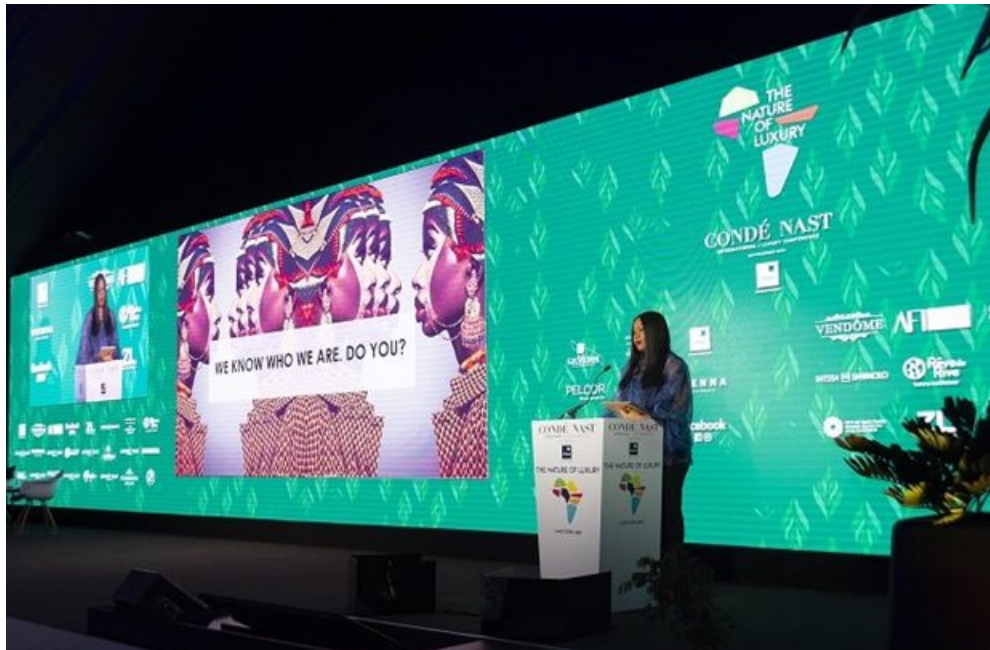


Image credit: Heather Shuker

Pézard, who is based in Paris but of Nigerian descent, explained that the definition of being African is multifaceted.

“To be *from* Africa, originating from one of its 55 countries, means to be directly linked to the source of its cultures and to be responsible for its guardianship. But to be *of* Africa, being a descendant of the continent in the diaspora, means to be a carrier of its cultural expressions and a propagator of Afro cultures around the world.”

Globalisation of Afrocentric cultures

Afro-continentals, Afro-descendants and Afro-diasporans, scattered around the world in their millions, are collectively carrying Afrocentric culture – whether expressed through fashion, art, music, cinema or literature. Africa is of course not a country; but in reality, when we look at Africa from a cultural perspective, Africa is also not a continent, Pézard said.

“So when we speak about Africa, are we speaking about the 55 countries with all of its complexities and opportunities, or are we speaking about a cultural phenomenon that has spread to every single continent on Earth.”



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The discourse around expanding African luxury, therefore, must also embrace the Africa that is promoted through cultures and settlements abroad.

"The globalisation of Afrocentric cultures is already in the luxury space. A look at recent campaigns and collaborations of Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Chanel by Afro-descendants and Afro-diasporans confirm this," said Pézard.



Louis Vuitton Men's Spring-Summer 2019 Campaign

Afrocentric consumption

Luxury brands looking to design for and market to what they'd consider 'African' consumers need to be mindful of the above distinctions in terminology. What may initially be aimed at consumers living on the African continent, could resonate with Afro-descendants elsewhere in the world, because Pézard says these groups are influenced by similar cultural factors.

"The same factors that drive Africans to buy luxury is very similar to what drives African Americans or Afro-Brazilians, for example, to buy luxury items," she noted.

For those born outside of the continent, this Afrocentric movement is leading them to investigate and connect with their ancestral roots. Pézard said that Africa doesn't have a luxury market but *several* markets both in and outside the continent. "About 80% of luxury purchases by Africans living in Africa are done outside Africa. Then add the purchasing power of Afro-diasporans and Afro-descendants and you get the idea."



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Changing face of the luxury consumer

Another factor to have a profound change on the luxury business in the coming decades is the growing proportion of people with darker complexions. Skin tones are getting darker, Pézard said, driven mainly by factors such as climate change and population growth dynamics. Other factors like intermarriage and immigration also play a role.

Africa has one of the youngest populations in the world, and India and Nigeria – both inhabited by darker-skinned people – will be among the world's top three most populous countries in the next 30 years. Luxury consumers will look different, and brands must understand that the strategies for beauty, and even fashion, will need to adapt to this change.

7 keys to unlocking opportunity

Brands looking to harness the Afrocentric luxury opportunity would be wise to consider the following basic rules, as detailed by Pézard:

Unlearn to relearn: Most of what's known about Africa has been perpetrated by narratives that aren't accurate. Understand that what we know about Africa is wrong, and relearn what it really means to be African.

Master the Afro-diction: Afro-diction is about being fluent in the use of certain terms related to Africa. When do we say Africa, when do we reference specific countries, when do we use cultures to describe people or brands?

Avoid cultural appropriation: Citizens are more active than ever in monitoring and calling out brands that are guilty of this. Consequences could be dire.

Be Afro-culture literate: Understand and educate yourself as brands and professionals on historical aspects that could potentially cause frictions within consumer groups.

Be non-racist, diverse and inclusive: Racism can manifest unconsciously. Make a conscious effort to be non-discriminatory to avoid blunders.

Invest in deep market insights: Africa is vast and not homogenous; it has multiple nations, cultures, languages and selling points.

Create a diversity pillar: This should form part of your corporate strategy.



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Building the African luxury economy

The relationship between Africa and luxury is not only linked to consumption, but as a continent rich in creativity and artistic ability, Africa is also producing luxury.

Luxury Connect Africa is helping to drive the emergence of an African luxury economy by investing million of euros in African luxury heritage brands promoting the Afrocentric movement and with the potential to become successful global businesses.

Pézard started Luxury Connect Africa, a business resource and investment platform, to assist in accelerating the growth in African heritage luxury brands and facilitating the expansion of international luxury companies on the African continent.

She noted that Africa's history may be filled with much suffering and pain, but that these experiences have also defined us as Africans in terms of our resilience and sense of character. "Africans are taking back their resources across every single facet of society, from creativity to natural resources, and transforming these into a collective value that will last for several generations."

Pézard ended her talk with a quote from French poet and novelist Victor Hugo that says, "No power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come."

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