



congo  
clothing  
company

Streetwear for Social Justice





NEW YORK





Milain Fayulu's upbringing traversed three continents across the planet. "I was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo," he told me. "We lived in France when I was young, moved to the United States ... back to France, and then we went on a huge African tour. I lived in Mali, Ivory Coast, Nigeria for a bit, Ethiopia—and then I came back to my country in the Congo." Fayulu completed high school in France, went to the University of Miami for undergrad, and then ended up at MIT, where he completed a master's degree in political science in 2022.

"I consider myself a global citizen," Fayulu said. "This is reflected in my habits, my consumptions, the food I eat, the clothes I wear. I love minimalism and muted colors, but I equally love cool, bright African patterns. I love pasta but also local Congolese dishes." He related this back to Congo Clothing Company (CCC), which he co-founded in 2020 with Andrea Ferrari Lucas. "[CCC] is a brand that should make any global citizen comfortable, whether [they're] from Cambridge, London, Kinshasa, Paris or Tokyo."

I was curious: how did his experiences moving around influence his perspective on fashion? "That's illustrated in the way our logo is built,"

Fayulu answered. "[Its] zigzag is a reflection of my African upbringing, specifically Congolese. We borrowed that aesthetic from the Kuba Kingdom that was relatively powerful in the 17th century, where women in particular were famous for their use of geometric patterns. The zigzag is an illustration of that culture and the asymmetrical forms that are predominant in most African cultures. But we put the zigzag in between two straight lines that are more illustrative of my Western upbringing, where you have straight lines, denim jackets ... The idea behind the aesthetics of [CCC] is: how do you merge the two cultures together?"


CCC uses fashion to draw awareness to the crisis of conflict-related sexual violence in the DRC. "I was really frustrated with the predicament of women in the Congo," Fayulu said. "We've had this conflict ongoing in the eastern part of the country for over 25 years." Fayulu expressed his excitement at the global recognition when Congolese gynecologist Dr. Denis Mukwege received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for his work on sexual violence, followed by his frustration when this attention quickly faded from the mainstream. "People have an attention deficit which has been amplified ... with the advent of









A young woman with long brown hair and round glasses is looking intently at a blackboard. She is wearing a blue denim jacket with the sleeves rolled up. Her right hand is raised, with her fingers touching the blackboard. The background is a dark, geometric pattern, possibly a wall or a large window. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

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toxic masculinity





social media,” Fayulu continued. “It’s hard, to put it practically, for kids sitting in Cambridge—who were born here with no connection whatsoever to the Congo—to put the predicament of these women in their order of priority.”

“So, how do you capture attention span on a cause that’s abstract for most people?” Fayulu mused. “I thought that fashion could be a great connector because fashion ... transcends borders. You could be sitting in Shanghai or Paris or Congo or Cairo, and the one thing that you would have in common might be the Nike hoodie or the Paris Saint-Germain tee that you wear. Fashion can be a common language, and I thought that there was a great opportunity to use it as a connector and tell the story of the tragedy occurring in the Congo via clothing.”

Fayulu thus posed a new theory of change. “I approached Dr. Mukwege,” he said. “I praised him for his work ... but I told him that I believe that there’s a fundamental limitation in the NGO approach ... You’re always showcasing the problem to the world from an angle of pity or sadness. The technical term for it in political science research is a damage-centered approach. In order to connect people to the problem,

***“[CCC] tells the story of the tragedy occurring in the Congo via clothing.”***

you need to appeal to their pity, and it gives this impression of Congolese people as hopeless.”

CCC implements an alternative approach. “With fashion, the first encounter that you may have with the brand is: ‘Oh, my God, it’s a cool design.’” Fayulu said. “And then you get sucked into the educational piece of it and learn through your interaction with the brand that there’s this problem occurring in the Congo. But your first connection is one that’s joyous.”



We turned to examine specific clothing pieces—including CCC's 'toxic masculinity' T-shirt. "My partner Andrea, who hails from Venezuela, a patriarchal society, wrote her undergraduate thesis on toxic masculinity. So we had a lot of food for thought," Fayulu said. "Oftentimes what you realize is that violence against these women is perpetrated by men who themselves are somewhat victims because they grew up in very difficult environments where violence is omnipresent ... It's fascinating, because when we came up with the T-shirt, you've got a lot of people who are overwhelmingly supportive, but you also have a fraction of people that are against the concept of toxic masculinity ... they believe that this pins women and men against each other." He welcomes this critical dialogue. "If you wear that T-shirt and you walk around for 10 hours,

in the Congo are suffering these atrocities. But even if that doesn't concern you, you need to put Congo in the context of globalization." He detailed the DRC's role as a major provider of raw minerals—including 65% of the world's cobalt supply and 80% of coltan—found in electronics and batteries. "To put it very simply, there's no Tesla without Congo," he said. "People are all about the Green Revolution—that doesn't happen without Congo ... It's a very [resource] rich country, and these women ultimately are suffering ... because everybody else uses these resources for their growth at their expense. So the least we can do is to do right by them."

I asked Fayulu about the response he has seen to the company's messaging. "The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive," he replied. "Our theory was

***"If you wear that T-shirt and you walk around for 10 hours, you will see a lot of people stopping you ... it's a conversation trigger."***

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Overall, the company's designs aim to spark conversation, interest, and curiosity. Fayulu pointed me to the engraved buttons on CCC's denim jackets. "It says: 'Justice, Paix, Travail.' In French, meaning: 'justice, peace, labor.' This is the country's official slogan. We are far from it in practice, but it is certainly a state we aspire to get to. This is a little design that you have to look for to notice it, but then it triggers a conversation," he continued, pointing also to the flags sewn inside CCC's tees and jackets. "We're trying to create these small connections through design."

"One thing that is very important from my perspective is: people should really care about what's happening in the Congo," Fayulu said. "It's horrendous that women

that CCC could act as a communication vehicle, and we've seen that materialize time and time again. The first reaction that we get from people typically is: 'Oh, my God, I had no idea.' We've seen a desire from people to help and to be supportive." Fayulu mentioned recognition from the United Nations in a 2022 white paper. "They showcased us as one of the few companies in the world that has an innovative market-driven solution to address conflict-related sexual violence."

CCC has also helped train survivors of sexual violence in the DRC through sewing workshops at Panzi Hospital and is currently expanding into digital prints. "In terms of capacity," Fayulu said, "we've trained about 40 survivors to date. What we've learned is that they want more ... This prompted us to rethink the structure of the workshops and to think about ...





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digitizing things. How do we unlock access to the digital economy for these women that are currently locked out of it?"

We discussed CCC's future and Fayulu's broader vision for fashion as a tool for social change. "We want to become one of the first major African brands," he said. "The problem in globalism nowadays is ... you know France because you like cheese or wine. Italy, maybe you like pasta. Japan, you might like sushi ... Every country has a cultural export that the world is at least aware

of. You don't have to love it. But you're aware of it, right?" He gestured to me on his screen. "If I asked you today—Africa, what would you respond?"

I hesitated, then answered that I wasn't sure. "You see?" Fayulu exclaimed. "How can a continent of 54 countries not have multiple, easily identifiable, cultural exports? It's ridiculous. And so we want CCC to be a global cultural export from the African continent to the world."







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