

# OZWALD BOATENG GIVES NEW MEANING TO THE TERM POWER DRESSING

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ere we go with an Obama-like statement, right. Enough is enough. We're at a point with Africa where it's too boring to be hearing the same old mantra of poverty and famine. We keep banging on that drum. Ultimately we need to talk about positive messages and what Africa can do for itself. So says Oswald Boateng, who, it's clear, is not one to mince his words. Sat behind a large desk in the bowels of his Savile Row head quarters, he looks like a man who means business. An oil portrait of Oswald leans against the wall and wooden sculptures keep guard on the shelves behind him. Yet despite the grandeur of our surroundings, his views on Africa are far from empty rhetoric. The tailor, or "bespoke couturier" as he prefers to be called, is clearly passionate about promoting development on the continent. "The big question is, how do we communicate to the rest of the world that Africa is not about kids with guns and AIDS? It's actually one of the most plentiful places on the planet. Africa's success is the world's success."

These strongly held convictions meant that, when the president of the Republic of Ghana, John Agyekum Kufuor, asked him to host a catwalk show in Accra last year to celebrate the 200 years since the cessation of slavery and the 50th anniversary of Ghana's independence, Oswald took the opportunity seriously. Attended by 53 leaders from the African Union, the event, which included a speech by Reverend Jesse Jackson, was aimed at

rebranding Africa. "The fashion show was saying to all of these presidents that Africa has the potential to be one of the greatest places on Earth. Why is that? Very simple - because it controls fifty to seventy per cent of the world's natural resources - from oil to diamonds to gas to water. So the concept of poverty just doesn't make sense. There's been a real attitude of giving to Africa, and that's a beautiful thing, but Africa has also given so much back. Africa has to be allowed to be in the position to get the correct value for those resources and the answers have to be homegrown."

In the same spirit, Oswald has embraced THISDAY's Africa Rising concerts. Presenting his current ready-to-wear collection, alongside sets by Chris Brown and Mary J Blige, the beautifully chaotic July 13 concert in Lagos was a far cry from the Milan and Paris catwalks he's used to. "It was a very powerful experience. The response I got from the crowd was what you'd expect from being a musician," he smiles. "The conditions were challenging"



OSWALD BOETANG  
WASHINGTON DC  
Photo: Simon Harris

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but it gave me an overriding confidence that if I can do a show there, I can do one anywhere."

His Blackberry rings. He ignores it, and continues, clearly fired up by the subject at hand and his own visions for the future of Africa. "Because you're working with a blank sheet of paper in Africa, we can learn the lessons of the rest of the world and create the most wonderful, well considered cities. We know the mistakes of China. We know the pressure of the population in India. And we know that in Europe the infrastructure is too old to cope today. So all of those things can be taken into consideration when we're developing Africa. What's great about Africa's position is the fact that we can do it right." He takes a breath, and a sip of water. "This is the same message I see with Africa Rising. Africa now needs to have confidence in itself. This isn't about arrogance; it's to do with knowing what Africa is worth. Africa Rising is trying to find that first step and, in my small way, I'm doing my part. Everyone from the African diaspora has a spiritual responsibility to help change the continent."

Ozward's contribution to Britain's cultural landscape is undeniable. Born in London to Ghanaian parents in the late 1960s, he started tailoring aged 16, set up a business on Portobello Road in his early twenties and by the 1990s his bespoke service had found a loyal following. Boateng's sights have always been set on Savile Row, the official home of gentleman's tailoring, and in 2002 he joined the street's hallowed ranks. Not satisfied by simply flipping over the 'Open' sign to his new HQ, he also hosted a street party to mark the occasion, the first time the famous Row had been closed to traffic since The Beatles performed their farewell gig on the roof of No. 3 in 1969.

Today, after 20 years in the trade, his reputation for reinventing the art of suit-making is cemented. "I've always rooted everything in British tailoring. It's about taking something traditional and making it modern. It's about understanding how to cut suits, develop fabrics and find new techniques of development," he muses. "I love what Savile Row

represents, I love the significance of tailoring in British society, so being able to influence it by just being here is very important for me."

Although Boateng is British, his roots in Africa are also felt in his designs, especially through his bold use of colour. Thumb through the rails in his sleek, black showroom and his suits range from sedate blacks, blues and grays through to vibrant yellows, purples and greens. "At first I introduced colour just to shirts as a tool to move my aesthetic on and didn't consider it an African influence, but over time I've become willing to accept that my background is part of my approach to colour. As designers we evolve and what we understand as driving us creatively evolves too. Now I'd say my heritage has influenced my way of using colour without question."

Whichever end of his kaleidoscopic range his customers choose, Ozward's end aim is the same. "When a man puts on one of my suits, I want him to feel as good as he can feel. It's a tailor's job to make a suit that fits perfectly and brings out a man's best attributes. For me that's the start position, it's what I work for, because if someone feels good, he shares that with the rest of the world."

His Blackberry rings again. He switches it off. This is a man too busy with the big things in life to abide distractions, as the accolades that have been heaped upon him testify. He had an exhibition devoted to him at the Victoria & Albert museum in 2005, received an OBE from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 2006, was recognised by the World Economic Forum as a young global leader in 2007, and now in 2008 he's been appointed to the REACH Committee, which aims to recruit role models and fight low attainment among the UK's young black male populace.

A husband and father of two, whatever Ozward Boateng sets his mind to, which in the near future includes launching womenswear and opening 50 new stores across the globe, he achieves. Watch out Africa, here he comes. ●



OSWALD BOATENG WITH NAOMI CAMPBELL

#### BOATENG & FRIENDS

#### OSWALD BOATENG'S A-LIST CLIENTELE INCLUDES:

##### MUSICIANS

David Bowie  
Herbie Hancock  
Lenny Kravitz  
George Michael  
Seal

##### ACTORS

Brad Pitt  
Laurence Fishburne  
Jamie Foxx  
Will Smith  
Forest Whitaker

##### LEADERS

Richard Branson  
Yves Carcelle  
Rev Jesse Jackson  
Spike Lee  
Alan Yau

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