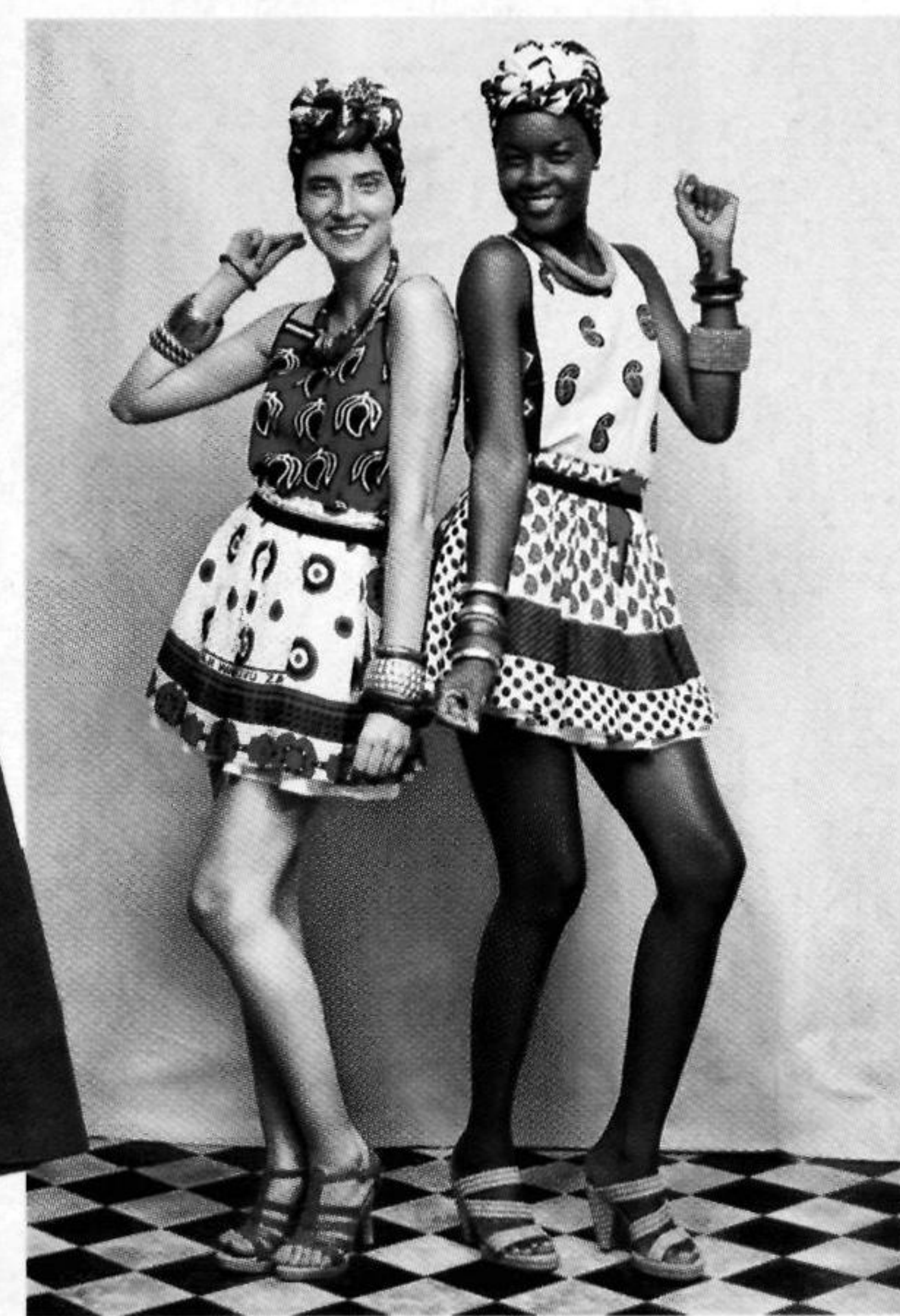




**Teamwork** Patternmakers, tailors and embroiderers who worked on Suno's first collection gather for a group portrait, above; stitching grosgrain bindings onto Suno dresses, below; Suno cotton smoking jacket, right; models in Suno's spring looks, far right



investment in Africa need not be about building more safari lodges."

His idea was to start a fashion label and name it after his mother Suno, who owns a house on the Swahili Muslim island of Lamu, off Kenya's coast. "I'm interested in contemporary things, so I wanted to do a collection women could wear to an art opening, to dinner. I didn't want to do an 'ethnic collection,' whatever that means," Osterweis says.

He called his friend Erin Beatty, a Parsons the New School for Design graduate who had designed for Generra and the Gap. He persuaded her to go to Africa and showed her a collection of vintage *kangas* (large rectangles of printed cotton worn by women across East Africa) that he figured could be reworked into pieces that a cool girl would wear on a hot summer night in Manhattan. To maintain standards, every silhouette had to work first in plain black. And with that, sampling began

in New York City at a garment-district specialist called Johnny's Fashions.

Investigating local production in Nairobi, Osterweis called on Makena Mwaria, who is working hard to revive a company named African Heritage Design. But there was a problem. None of her machinists knew how to sew a French seam. "About 20 years ago, the U.S. and Europe started sending secondhand clothing to Africa and, by an act of charity, decimated the local industry," says Osterweis. So he imported Aeri Hwang of Johnny's Fashions to provide training. Mwaria was delighted. "We have to improve quality. I hate the stigma about 'made in Africa,' where customers are coerced to buy to help, not to buy to want."

The result, Suno, debuts this season at Opening Ceremony in Los Angeles and New York City and Maria Luisa in Paris. "It's a breakthrough for us," Mwaria says. This first season, she has added 23 workers.

To complete production, Osterweis needed more *kangas*. Abu Bakar, a shopkeeper on Lamu, sourced these from women from outlying islands who were delighted to sell or exchange theirs for Kenya's latest designs—which currently feature President Obama and such slogans in Swahili as *SISI NA WESA* (Yes We Can). Nairobi trader Bhupen Shah searched mainland Kenya and Tanzania for unusual ones. "The *kanga* speaks with a very sweet tongue," says Shah of the mottoes that are always part of the design. "I love one that says WATCH YOUR ROOSTERS. THERE'S A NEW CHICKEN IN THE VILLAGE," Osterweis says, laughing.

But while this first collection is exotic and funky, might consumers tire of the conceit? "No," insists Osterweis, who recently made a business partner of his father, a capital manager. "The next collection hardly uses *kangas* at all. We're talking long term here. If we get this right and women like it, we can change lives." ■