

VOGUE

FASHION

**This Artist Is Wearing His Mother's Clothing to
Promote Social Change in Ghana**BY CHIOMA NNADI
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Photographed by Dennis Akuoku-Frimpong

Ghanaian Independence Day falls on March 6 and last year artist Serge Attukwei Clottey marked the occasion with a boundary-pushing act of self-liberation. He walked through the streets of Accra, the nation's capital, in his deceased mother's clothes with members of his art collective—also in their mothers' clothing—marching by his side in solidarity. Wearing vibrantly printed traditional dress, the mostly male crew drew hundreds of onlookers out of their homes and onto the street, sending shockwaves through Ghanaian society where the conversation around gender fluidity is only just beginning to open up and homosexuality is illegal.

For Clottey, who lost his mother in 2014, the public performance was born out of a personal frustration with the country's funeral traditions in which a mother's belongings are distributed among her daughters a year after her passing. As an only son, he was essentially disinherited from his mother's legacy. He has recuperated much of her textile collection from his family for phase two of his project, entitled *My Mother's Wardrobe*. The new photo series is set against the lush landscape of Labadi, a coastal neighborhood on the outskirts of the city where the artist spent his childhood. According to local legend, the Labadi lagoon is home to a river goddess and has been a place of spiritual sanctuary for generations. The 6-foot-1 artist has all the swagger of a modern-day Poseidon as he poses with traditional fabrics wrapped tightly around his muscular body. "In my culture, a woman's richness lies in her closet. My mom would always say, instead of putting money in the bank, I'm investing in your future in this way," says Clottey, speaking via Skype from his studio in Accra. "The truth is historically fabric was used in the trade of humans, and because of that we have inherited this idea. When a man is married to a woman, he's expected to present these fabrics to his wife."



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The most prized of them all is undoubtedly kente, the fabric of the Ashante people. A ghostlike figure draped in the distinctive handwoven cloth hovers ominously in the background of one of his portraits. "That piece of kente is the most valuable. It was used to cover my mother's coffin," he explains. Kente has origins that are believed to trace back to the Ashanti Asantehene, or king Nana Osei Tutu, who founded the Ashante empire in the early 1700s. Back then it was made from pure silk, a rare and precious commodity, though these days that level of quality and craftsmanship is much scarcer in Ghana. Unlike traditional kente, the cheaply made African-inspired fabrics imported from China that are piled high in the markets of Accra hardly stand that test of time. In fact in the next stage of his project, Clottey plans to set some of those mass-produced textiles on fire, a telling commentary on the ephemeral nature of fast fashion and the threat it poses to Ghana's centuries-old artisanal practices.



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Though it's been over a year since Clottey first took to the streets in his mother's clothes, his performance continues to spark debate around gender equality and the question of LGBTQ rights. He's since managed to more than triple the size of his GoLokal art collective, galvanizing many of his young creative followers with a rallying call for social change. "It took me a month and a half to convince my collective to join me on *My Mother's Wardrobe*. Some of them were against homosexuality and didn't want to be seen as gay for fear of being physically attacked. But in the end their attitudes changed," he says. "If can make people think with my work, break down those stereotypes, then perhaps more change will come."

Serge Attukwei Clottey will be exhibiting with [Gallery 1957](#) at Art X Lagos at The Civic Centre, Lagos in November.