



Images of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, taken from Northumbria student Dede Arisekola's winning research project

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Hidden hero inspires winning fashion project

The incredible life of a woman described as Nigeria's first feminist has been the inspiration behind an award-winning research project by a Northumbria University student.

Final year Fashion Design and Marketing student Dede Arisekola was recently named winner of the 2024 British Fashion Council and British Library student research competition, held this year in collaboration with Priya Ahluwalia, founder and Creative director of Ahluwalia.

Multi-award winning label Ahluwalia was launched in 2018 by Priya Ahluwalia. The label combines elements from the designer's dual Indian-Nigerian heritage and London roots. It explores the potential of vintage and surplus clothing by giving existing material a new life through various textile and patchwork techniques.

Students entering the competition were challenged to create a portfolio of work based on a 'hidden' figure whose impact has previously been overlooked, using the British Library collections to research and create their designs.

For Dede, the brief gave her the opportunity to explore the life of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a Nigerian educator and political campaigner who fought tirelessly for women's rights and played a significant role in Nigeria's independence movement.

Dede Arisekola reacts to finding out she has won the British Fashion Council and British Library student research competition

Born in 1900, Funmilayo was passionate about education. Having been among the first cohort of girls in Nigeria to receive a formal education, she went on to set up the first pre-school classes in the country, as well as supporting women from poorer backgrounds to access literacy classes.

She was a vocal advocate for women's rights, campaigning for women in Nigeria to be given the right to vote and be represented in governing bodies and led 10,000 women in protest marches against unfair taxes imposed under British colonial rule.

Funmilayo died in 1978 after being thrown from a second-floor window following a raid on the home of her son, the well-known musician Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti, who was a vocal critic of Nigeria's military government.

Despite all she did in her lifetime, the fame of her son often overshadowed Funmilayo's own achievements, which led to Dede's decision to choose her as her 'hidden' figure.



Part of Dede's winning competition submission portfolio

Dede said: "Funmilayo spent her entire life advocating for women and although she was a notable figure in Nigerian history, the fame of her son Fela Kuti and other male relatives has unfortunately overshadowed her amazing and truly inspirational legacy. Funmilayo mothered a nation and that is why I chose her as my hidden figure."

With Dede's family originally from Nigeria, researching the life of the Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti gave her the chance to discover more about the country's history, particularly the lives and experiences of women over the last century.

She was also able to draw from the memories of her 93-year-old Grandmother, who she interviewed while visiting Nigeria over Christmas.

Dede said: "When I was talking to my Granny, I found out that she was a student at a missionary-owned girls' school very close to the school Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti taught at. She told me stories about the girls and women in the area praising Funmilayo for the work she was doing in promoting women's rights and education for women."

Having developed an interest in textile printing during her time at Northumbria University, Dede decided to tell the story of Funmilayo's life and impact through print, taking inspiration from Àdìrẹ indigo-dyed cotton cloth – traditionally made and worn by women throughout the Yoruba region of south-western Nigeria.

The work of Ahluwalia's Creative Director, Priya Ahluwalia, who set this year's brief, also inspired Dede's project.

Combining both influences, Dede created a fabric design based on the story of two Nigerian women from different economic backgrounds whose lives nevertheless mirror each other's in many ways.

The pattern she created aims to highlight the many roles Nigerian women play and pays tribute to the strength of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and women like her.

From there, Dede designed a collection of garments to be created from the fabric, taking inspiration from the Nigerian tradition of women carrying their babies in a 'wrapper' – a long piece of cloth which can be tied in many ways to create different shapes and styles.

Her collection is described as a modern take on the drape and wrapper style of Nigerian fashion, using colourful handmade prints and strong shapes.

Dede wore one of her designs to the winner's announcement event at the British Library, where she discovered she had been selected as the winner of this year's British Fashion Council and British Library student research competition.

Speaking about Dede's work and why she was chosen as the competition winner, Maja Maricevic, Director of Science and Innovation at the British Library said: "This annual competition, held in collaboration with the British Fashion Council, highlights the incredible diversity of the British Library's collections and the importance of research as an integral part of the fashion design process.

"We were so impressed with the work of all our finalists and it was a really hard call nominating a winner. Even within such tough competition, Dede's

work stood out both through her outstanding design, but also the powerful connections that her research made between the inspirational work of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the experiences of women in Dede's own family."

Assistant Professor Sarah Walton, Programme Leader for the [BA \(Hons\) Fashion Design and Marketing](#) course at Northumbria University, said: "Seeing Dede's project and talent recognised and celebrated by the British Fashion Council and British Library competition is brilliant. We continue to be so proud of our Fashion Design and Marketing students; thoughtful and creative research is essential to the fashion process, and we aim for our curriculum to always allow students to engage in great opportunities like this."

Speaking about her designs, Dede said: "I hope that this collection highlights the connection between first generation immigrants and their older relatives. Through the culture, memories and wisdom shared between two generations, stories, traditions, and authenticity are kept alive."

"I interviewed my Grandmother and found out so much I didn't know about my own heritage. I hope the concept of my collection might inspire other young people to find out more and celebrate their heritage."

Find out more about the [Northumbria University School of Design](#) and the [Fashion Design and Marketing BA \(Hons\) degree course](#).

Watch below - Dede demonstrates the different ways one of her designs can be worn.

[View embedded content here](#)

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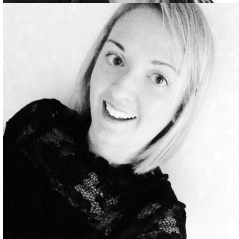


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