MODEM Dialogues - In conversation with Sakina M'sa

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Sakina M’sa. Fashion Designer, Founder and DA of M/SA. Vice President of the Fonds de Dotation Maison Mode Méditerranée.

Portrait Sakina M’sa ® Anael Boulay
Questions conceived and hosted by Florian Müller

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MODEM:
Your career began far from the conventional fashion capitals, in contexts often marked by social challenges rather than privilege. How did these beginnings shape the values that continue to guide you today?

SAKINA M'SA:
I learned fashion through life, not only through schools. My first universe was that of human rights activists - in Marseille and later in Paris. I saw people fighting for others, driven only by justice. I quickly understood that beauty means nothing if it isn’t accompanied by dignity. That is where my social consciousness was born. The question of decent working conditions came naturally to me, long before “sustainability” became a trend. To create, yes - but never at someone else’s expense. Joseph Beuys taught me that art is transformation - a social sculpture. This path, between art and activism, led me to Naomi Klein’s No Logo and to an aesthetics of resistance.

MODEM:
Literature was your first field of study, and later you chose fashion as your medium. In

your eyes, where do words end and textiles begin to speak in their own narratives?

SAKINA M'SA:
My passion for French began with a love for words. I didn't have much, but I had curiosity. At the Noailles market in Marseille, I bought books for twenty cents - worn, stained, yet carrying worlds. That's how I met Vian, Lautréamont, Breton, Baudelaire. I discovered France through what is most free and poetic. Literature shaped my gaze and taught me rhythm, metaphor, and silence. Even today, I hear fashion as syntax: a cut is a word, a seam a comma, a garment an open sentence. Imagination is a muscle, and books are its breath. To create is to read the world - with one's hands.

MODEM:
Early on, you worked with recycled stock and second-hand resources, turning constraints into starting points. What inner conviction enabled you to see limitation as an opportunity for invention?

SAKINA M'SA:
My grandmother, Coco, raised me with one truth: "*Our greatest enemy is waste*." She came from a world where everything was mended, nothing thrown away, where gestures were measured and nature respected. From this domestic philosophy, I built an ethic of creation. Beauty lies not in the new, but in duration and repair. To prolong a garment's life is to honor life itself. It is also a spiritual message: we are all interconnected - fauna, flora, humans - within the same living cycle. Nothing is lost; everything transforms. Even pain can become material.

MODEM:
You have collaborated with women who were entering fashion through paths of reintegration into society. Which transformations struck you most deeply in witnessing personal dignity evolving alongside craftsmanship?

SAKINA M'SA:
I don't create for others - I create from what passes through me. It is inner breathing, a way to restore balance. Each piece answers emotion - fear, hope, tenderness. To create is to recalibrate oneself. When I work with material, I heal. In that act of repair lies an offering to the collective. Each time one mends fabric, one mends the invisible thread between self and world. Creation connects - it is alignment, not pleasing. When what I do, think, and feel correspond, peace appears. That coherence, I try to transmit - stitch after stitch.

MODEM:
Your projects often occupy spaces beyond the catwalk-public institutions, community halls, unexpected venues. What role does the setting itself play in transmitting the message of a collection?

SAKINA M'SA:
I have always had a visceral connection with places. Walls, floors, light - they all speak to me. The most powerful experience was the Women's Prison of Fleury-Mérogis, where I led a project. Even a brief presence there transforms you. Those walls breathe with stories, silences, and scars. I believe spaces have souls. A fashion show doesn't need a podium - it needs meaning. A city hall, a museum, an industrial ruin, a prison: each holds a collective memory. In such places, a garment becomes a social witness. It carries beauty where society no longer looks for it.

MODEM:
Many designers define success as recognition, yet you link fashion consistently with responsibility. How do you preserve a creative identity when ethical choice becomes an inseparable part of your practice?

SAKINA M'SA:
I often speak of creative ecology. I admire Alain Passard, chef of L'Arpège, who cooks daily with what his garden gives him. I create my collections in the same way: I look into the "fridge" of my atelier - the leftovers, dormant fabrics, forgotten fragments - and I compose. It is both a kitchen of matter and of the soul. I do not seek the perfection of the new, but the truth of the possible. And that "possible" has become a real economic model. My garments are singular yet can respond to wholesalers. In our atelier we developed a scalable upcycling technique, merging craft with industrial precision. It is demanding, unpredictable, and alive. Chance becomes a material, surprise a partner, and beauty appears in the tension between mastery and accident.

MODEM:
Aesthetics and activism intersect in your work in unusual ways. When does the garment act purely as clothing, and when does it become a cultural or political statement in its own right?

SAKINA M'SA:
A garment is always political, whether we admit it or not. I've said: "*If your T-shirt cost almost nothing, someone else paid for it with their life*." We must revive the word "value" inside the "value chain." In 2007, I moved my atelier into the Petit Palais Museum. With women and youth from the suburbs, we transformed tons of clothing from Emmaüs into a new collection. The exhibition drew 25,000 visitors. That experience gave me the courage to transform my company legally. In 2008, it became a Social Integration Enterprise - a fashion house as a social laboratory. Fashion can be an act of humanity.

MODEM:
At a time when speed dominates production and presentation, you place value on long processes of making and exchange. What does slowness reveal to you that accelerations tend to hide?

SAKINA M'SA:
Fast fashion destroyed the time of the hand. It replaced creation with production. Yet to create is to breathe slowly. It is to let the gesture think, to let patience speak. I was nourished by Paul Virilio, philosopher of speed. He taught me that every technological progress carries its own accident. Speed is often an escape disguised as evolution. I believe in a reconciled modernity: high tech in service of low tech, innovation serving craft. Slowness is not nostalgia - it is wisdom. Only in slowness does meaning return, and the hand reconnects with the heart.

MODEM:
Within the industry there are countless unspoken strains, from emotional fatigue to fragile self-worth. What space needs to exist so that care can belong as naturally to the process as ambition does?

SAKINA M'SA:

Between 2004 and 2014, I worked in banlieues and townships. There, I understood that self-esteem is a political force. Manual work and sewing restore dignity. Finishing a garment is proof of existence. I've seen women straighten their posture through sewing, men recover their breath at the machine. Work, when connected to meaning, becomes healing. Even in luxury, there is another poverty - that of time. People perform but no longer breathe. To care - for self, others, time - is clarity, not weakness. Without clarity, there is no beauty. My collections invite us to remember why we love fashion.

MODEM:
Looking far ahead, if none of the garments survived but the essence of your practice resided in a single human gesture, which gesture would you wish future generations to inherit?

SAKINA M'SA:
I once gave a TED Talk titled "*Desires Lead to Illumination*." Desire is not a trap - it is a spark. It drives us to seek, to love, to create. But for desire to lead to light, it must be conscious. Raw desire consumes; conscious desire illuminates. When we stop wasting - material, time, emotion - we transform lack into creative energy. Illumination begins there: in the right gesture. I often speak of a circular economy of desire - to produce not to fill, but to nourish; to possess not to exist, but to connect. Marketing speaks of creating desire before the customer's need. True luxury is to desire less, but better.