

The Thinking Watermill Society | February 2022

# Interview with Ms Mary Mugure

(Co-Founder of Eisul Kenya)



Author: Maria Angela Maina, Chief Research Coordinator-Africa  
at The Thinking Watermill Society.



# Introduction

**Mary Mugure** is the co-founder of Eisul Kenya. While the fashion brand is fairly new in the industry, it has already participated in Swahili Fashion Week.

In this interview, The Thinking Watermill Society learns more about the inspiration behind Eisul Kenya and its exciting future plans.



1. You have a background in studying fashion, design and marketing. Why did you choose to pursue fashion design as a career?

From a very young age, fashion design was something I was interested in even when I did not know it could be pursued as a career. My mum used to sew and knit our sweaters from scratch and it fascinated me to see her do that. I remember insisting on getting Barbie dolls as opposed to stuffed toys as I wanted to dress them and I used to love making clothes for them when I was barely 6 years old at the time.

In school, I loved drawing when I got bored in class. At the time, I only saw it as a hobby. I first got exposed to fashion design as a career when I first watched *Project Runway* in high school. I remember how intrigued I was to watch the show and just could not get enough of it. The fact that this was an actual career I could pursue was so exciting.

I was good in math and other STEM-related subjects, so my parents thought I would pursue Mathematics or a career in Engineering. However, every time I thought of a career as a civil engineer or an economist, I just did not see a future there.

When we were selecting universities and the courses we wanted to pursue, I remember seeing Fashion Design and Marketing as a degree offered at Kenyatta University and I just knew what I wanted to do.



I immediately selected it as one of the courses alongside Economics and Civil engineering — but, I only chose the other two for my parents' satisfaction. When I got my acceptance letter, it was like a sign that this was what I was meant to do and I have not ever regretted pursuing this career path, despite the challenges and pushbacks that came from that decision.





## 2. Most people believe that education is not needed to work in the fashion industry. What are your thoughts on this perception?

Well, even if one decides not to study a fashion course before working in the industry, I believe they still receive education in a different way while working in the field.

Someone who has prior education has the advantage of prior knowledge before entering the field, while the persons who did not get that education may struggle at first, but will have the advantage of learning through the experience they gain.

Personally, when I was employed in my first fashion job, despite the education I had, there are still things that I had to learn on the job. However, I did have an advantage due to the prior knowledge from school that made it easier to adapt and tackle the tasks assigned.

I respect everyone's decision whether or not they choose to get a formal education in this field. However, education is important especially for those who are seeking employment in the fashion industry, as opposed to starting their own business, since it usually is a requirement for most fashion companies.



### 3. Why did you decide to launch your brand, Eisul, in 2018?

At the time I had just quit my job the previous year and I was looking for the next step in my career development. My business partner and **co-founder, Njeri Kariuki**, and I thought we should start a business together. We wanted to start a brand that was ethical and had sustainable practices in the whole garment production cycle. We also saw a gap in finding manufacturers that had ethical practices in their treatment of workers and hoped to create a brand that would change this.

Eisul means "*of high quality*" and that is exactly what we want our company to be known for. Starting Eisul was important especially considering this aspect is where the fashion industry will focus on. We hope to create garments for Eisul and other designer brands that are sustainable.

4. Eisul designs portray unique high-fashion elegance that can also be a part of everyday wear. What kind of fabrics and materials do you incorporate? Are they sustainable?

Some of the fabrics we used before were second-hand that we up-cycled into our designs. The first items we made while trying to build capital were hair bonnets which we made from second-hand silk scarves that we bought from the market as well as satin fabric bought from local fabric vendors. The current plan is sourcing from vendors who are eco-friendly and transparent with their production processes and ethics.

We want to create a sustainable journey for each garment from the sourcing of its raw materials to the delivery of the final product to the customer. We hope to invest in biotechnology in the future due to the current research and technological advancements that are aimed at reducing the carbon footprint and having zero waste.

The idea is to work with nature rather than against it. Natural fibers, such as cotton, are still harming the environment due to the chemical dyeing processes, hence doing more harm than good. The idea would be to get alternatives especially during the dyeing process. For example, by using microbes that produce pigment.



5. Ethics is another crucial part of the fashion industry. This includes the fair payment of garment workers. How do you ensure fair pay and treatment among your workers?



This is a sensitive and emotional topic for me as I have witnessed the lack of ethics in several garment factories here in Kenya.

Many garment workers, especially those who work in factories, are not paid fairly and are also mistreated. I think it is very important to respect the garment workers as well as every other employee we work with. Our brand has not yet started employing tailors because we are still outsourcing. Yet, I believe garment workers should work in a conducive environment.

The factory should provide protective gear and be eco-friendly. A garment's cost of making (CM) should be accurately calculated and workers should be paid fairly following the value of the garments, as well as their skill level while adhering to the labor laws.

## 6. In addition, what core ethical principles do you believe in while working with fashion?

Some things may seem irrelevant to others, but they make a very big difference while working in the fashion industry.

Many garment workers I have encountered value the conditions of their work environment as opposed to the money they make. They want to feel valued and respected. There are various ways that companies can achieve this. For example, they should get monetary compensation when they work overtime.

Also, it's important to value paternal leave and they should not lose their jobs for taking it. A company may also make a very big difference by setting up a daycare if they can afford it.

Further, even if the company does not provide meals, I think it is important to set up an area outside where they can sit and eat their lunch while designing their factory as opposed to sitting on the floor.



7. Fast fashion and the second-hand clothing market are often more preferred by consumers in East Africa. What challenges have you faced in regard to this competitive environment?

The biggest challenge we have faced is convincing our clients about the price. Most second-hand clothing is very cheap and affordable. With 1,000 Kenya Shillings (approximately 10US Dollars) you can buy 10 to 20 beautiful second-hand dresses. So, it becomes a challenge to convince a client to pay 3,000 Kenya Shillings for designing them a dress, when they can buy several second-hand dresses for that price. Many clients do not understand how the cost of making a garment works.

Also, the purchasing power of many people in Kenya is still quite low, so not many can afford to buy our designs.

Another challenge is that those who can afford to purchase our pieces would rather buy from fast fashion brands like Zara, H&M, or Fashion Nova. Some people even travel abroad to simply shop.

Another challenge especially with the second-hand market is that it is unique. It is difficult to see anyone with the same garment piece you buy and that is a big deal here. Hence, manufacturing ready-to-wear garments, even at batch level, is still a challenge unless you plan to export your pieces. It also becomes a challenge to manufacture your pieces in a factory due to the minimum run quantity expected.



8. You have a background in marketing which contributes to the management of your brand. Do you believe marketing plays an important role in influencing people's purchasing decisions?

Yes, marketing definitely plays a very important role in influencing people's decisions. In my experience, even the way you present your items can spark a client's interest to buy or make them rethink a purchase.

However, the service a customer gets when purchasing the first item is what will influence their second purchase most times. As long as you can solve a customer's problem or show them the value they get from said purchase, it's easy to influence their purchasing decisions.



## 9. Furthermore, are you open with your clients on any of your ethical and sustainable practices?

Yes, and it's even more important to me having witnessed how bad things are in the fashion industry.

Transparency is very important to our brand and I hope to make a difference especially for tailors in Kenya, fashion students and upcoming fashion designers, and the future fashion community here in East Africa and globally.





10. Eisul has achieved a great feat in a short amount of time, such as participation in Swahili Fashion Week. What should we expect from you and your brand in the future?



Thank you. It was indeed so humbling to debut our brand at Swahili Fashion Week, especially among so many well-renowned fashion brands.

We hope to continue growing our profile in the Fashion industry particularly in the manufacturing of high-end fashion garments that are ethical and sustainable.

We also desire to positively impact the Kenyan fashion industry and help improve it, thus making it easier for future fashion designers that will follow.



Thank you for your cooperation on behalf of The Thinking Watermill Society. All the best in your current and future endeavours, Ms Mugure.

## Learn More about Eisul Kenya

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# About The Thinking Watermill Society

The Thinking Watermill Society is a non-profit organization. In particular, it promotes the debate and exchange of ideas among its members regarding the changes underway in the economic, cultural and social landscape, together with the analysis of the consequences that said changes entail, so as to identify the possible opportunities of economic, cultural and social growth related to said changes.

Our headquarters are in Rome, Italy.

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