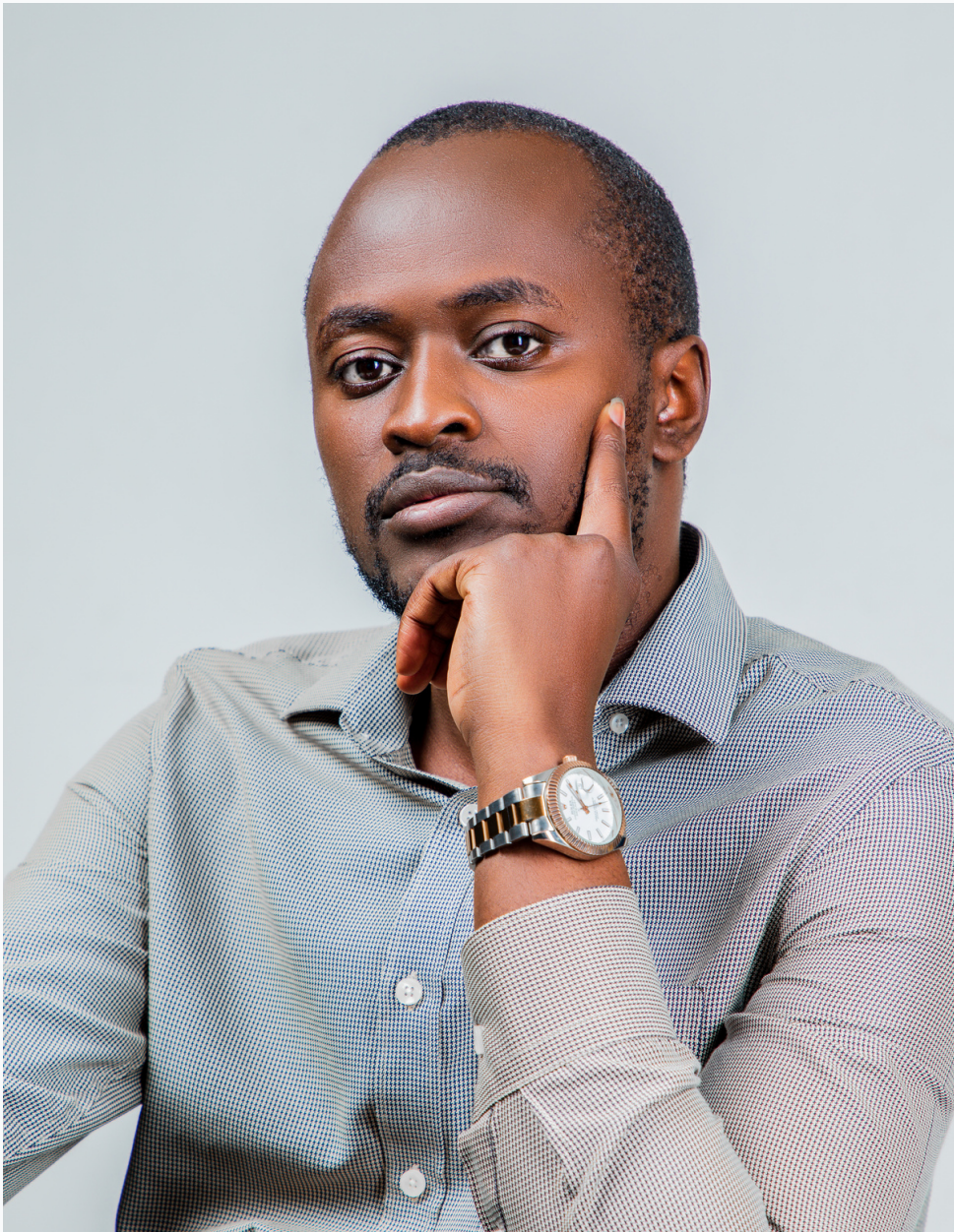


The Thinking Watermill Society | March 2024

Interview with Brian Kihindas

(Creative Director of Nairobi Fashion Week)



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Introduction

NAIROBI FASHION WEEK (NFW) is Kenya's premier fashion event that serves as a platform for talented designers to showcase their creativity on a global scale under the guidance of **Brian Kihindas**, its creative director.

In this interview with The Thinking Watermill Society, Brian tells all about NFW's origin, its operations as a special purpose vehicle for sustainability and its future plans for sustainable fashion in Kenya.

NAIROBI
FASHION
WEEK

1. What is Nairobi Fashion Week about and what motivated its creation?

Nairobi Fashion Week (NFW) emerged in 2013 within a landscape where fashion events like Kenya Fashion Week and Tribal Chic were prominent.

However, there was a noticeable gap in providing a platform focused on promoting African designers beyond Kenya, with an emphasis on innovation, distinctiveness, and access to markets. NFW was motivated by the need to address this gap and provide a space that celebrates creativity while supporting the growth of the African fashion industry.

Today, NFW continues to uphold its founding principles while evolving to meet the changing dynamics of the fashion industry.

The current direction of NFW is centred on

promoting sustainability across all aspects of the fashion value chain.

This includes advocating for ethical practices, supporting eco-friendly initiatives, and showcasing sustainable fashion brands.

Moreover, NFW remains committed to providing a platform for emerging and established African designers to showcase their talent on both local and global stages.



NAIROBI FASHION WEEK



NAIROBI FASHION WEEK

2. In what ways has Nairobi Fashion Week contributed to the global sustainable fashion movement, and how has it represented the unique cultural and environmental aspects of Kenya on the international stage?

Nairobi Fashion Week (NFW) has played a pivotal role in advancing the global sustainable fashion movement, notably through initiatives such as **Just Fashion Transition** which was launched under our umbrella. This collaborative effort advocates for a fashion industry prioritizing environmental sustainability and social equity.

"Just Fashion" campaign, is aimed at bolstering Kenya's fashion sector towards sustainability and social equity while focusing on four key advocacy and promotional areas throughout 2023.

Through NFW, sustainable fashion practices like slow fashion, upcycling, and the use of local fabrics are prominently showcased, resonating on an international scale. Additionally, NFW proudly highlights Kenya's cultural heritage by spotlighting indigenous fabrics and traditional techniques.

Simultaneously, NFW actively engages in discussions on environmental conservation and climate action.

In essence, NFW's initiatives reflect a steadfast commitment to driving positive change within the fashion industry, seamlessly integrating sustainability with cultural representation.



NAIROBI FASHION WEEK



3. How does Nairobi Fashion Week collaborate with local artisans and traditional craftsmen to integrate sustainable and traditional techniques into modern fashion?

Nairobi Fashion Week (NFW) prioritizes collaboration with local artisans and traditional craftsmen as an integral part of our mission to promote sustainability and celebrate Kenya's cultural heritage.

Our focus extends to emerging designers, including those who may have never created a collection before, as we believe in nurturing talent and supporting the growth of sustainable practices from the outset.

Heritage techniques and practices are at the forefront of our efforts, as they often align with sustainable principles and showcase the richness of African craftsmanship. Through NFW, we heavily emphasize the importance of integrating these heritage techniques into modern fashion. By doing so, we not only honour our cultural legacy but also pave the way for more sustainable approaches to design and production.

NFW places a strong emphasis on inviting and targeting local artisans and emerging designers for our educational initiatives, particularly focusing on sustainable business practices, sales, and branding. Recognizing that these aspects are crucial for the success and longevity of fashion businesses, we are committed to providing comprehensive support to our community.

Through our educational initiatives, we aim to equip artisans and emerging designers with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in the industry. Workshops, seminars, and training sessions are tailored to address topics such as sustainable production methods, effective sales strategies, and building a strong brand identity. By empowering them with practical insights and tools, we strive to enhance their competitiveness and resilience in the market.



4. How does Nairobi Fashion Week approach the vetting of designers to ensure they use sustainable materials and environmentally friendly fabrics?

Maintaining 100% sustainability in the Kenyan fashion landscape, which is still evolving, remains a challenge. However, at Nairobi Fashion Week (NFW), we take proactive measures to promote sustainability among participating designers. While it's understood that achieving complete sustainability may be a journey for many brands, we conduct thorough research on all brands that apply to ensure they demonstrate a commitment to sustainability.

Our vetting process involves meticulously reviewing each designer's brand ethos and practices. We prioritize designers who embrace sustainability as a core value and actively integrate it into their operations. This includes using bio-friendly fabrics, implementing eco-conscious production methods, and adhering to ethical standards throughout their supply chain.

For Season 7, where sustainable fashion is the theme, we extend a special invitation to designers to embrace this modus operandi. We encourage them to align their collections with sustainable principles and demonstrate tangible efforts towards minimizing environmental impact.

In addition to our vetting process, we actively support designers in their journey towards sustainability by hosting webinars and forums with sustainability practitioners. These events provide designers with insights on incorporating sustainable practices into their work, fostering a community of learning and collaboration.

Ultimately, Nairobi Fashion Week aims to set a precedent for sustainable fashion in Kenya by promoting and supporting designers who share our commitment to environmental responsibility. Through our vetting process, thematic invitations, and educational initiatives, we strive to create a platform that champions sustainability while advancing the growth and innovation of the fashion industry.



5. How has Nairobi Fashion Week positively impacted local communities and economies through its focus on empowering sustainable fashion and ethical production?

Through educational initiatives, NFW equips local artisans, traditional craftsmen, and emerging designers with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in the industry.

In an exciting development, NFW has partnered with Cultrite to bring European practitioners into the fold, facilitating workshops, seminars, and educational initiatives. This collaboration enhances the exchange of knowledge and best practices, enriching the local fashion ecosystem with insights from global experts.

Furthermore, NFW prioritizes providing access to markets during our event for designers and brands through strategic partnerships with stockists and buyers. By connecting local talent with international markets, NFW creates opportunities for economic growth and exposure on a global scale. This not only benefits individual designers and brands but also contributes to the overall development of the local fashion industry.

6. What are the biggest challenges Nairobi Fashion Week has faced in promoting sustainable fashion in Kenya, and what innovative solutions has the event introduced to address these challenges?

The promotion of sustainable fashion in Kenya through Nairobi Fashion Week (NFW) has been met with several significant challenges. Foremost among these hurdles is the inadequate infrastructure and limited availability of necessary materials locally. This scarcity often forces designers to resort to importing fabrics, resulting in inflated production costs and a subsequent impact on pricing competitiveness.

Additionally, high excise duty and importation costs further exacerbate the financial burden on designers, hindering their ability to adopt sustainable practices.

Moreover, NFW has addressed the lack of expertise in sustainability through educational initiatives such as webinars, workshops, and the Africa Fashion Frontier Program in collaboration with Cultrite. These programs provide designers with valuable insights and resources on integrating sustainable practices into their work, empowering them to adopt more environmentally conscious approaches.

Overall, Nairobi Fashion Week's innovative solutions, including partnerships, educational initiatives, and incubation programs, demonstrate a proactive approach to addressing the challenges of promoting sustainable fashion in Kenya.



7. Could you share details about any initiatives or partnerships Nairobi Fashion Week has established to promote a circular economy within the Kenyan fashion industry?

Nairobi Fashion Week (NFW) is deeply committed to promoting sustainability and fostering a circular economy within the Kenyan fashion industry. Through strategic partnerships and initiatives, NFW aims to drive positive change and elevate sustainable practices in the fashion sector.

NFW has engaged in strategic partnerships with organizations such as Curelabo, a pioneering force in sustainable fashion. Curelabo is renowned for its innovative approach to eco-friendly fabrics and patented technologies. Although the partnership is not definitive, there have been engagements aimed at exploring innovative solutions and promoting the use of sustainable materials such as tea leaves and sugarcane fabric. By leveraging expertise and resources, NFW aims to raise awareness and encourage the adoption of eco-friendly materials within the local fashion ecosystem.

Additionally, NFW has partnered with Sustainable Inclusive Business Kenya during the Circular Economy Africa conference organized by the Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA). These partnerships aim to amplify efforts in promoting eco-friendly practices within the Kenyan fashion industry. Through collaborations like these, NFW endeavours to host workshops, seminars, and educational initiatives aimed at empowering designers with the knowledge and resources needed to integrate sustainable practices into their work. Such partnerships provide valuable insights and guidance, further bolstering NFW's efforts to drive sustainable change within the Kenyan fashion industry.

Furthermore, NFW has partnered with Cultrite, a sustainability-focused platform, to amplify its efforts in promoting eco-friendly practices. Through this partnership, NFW collaborates with Cultrite to host workshops, seminars, and educational initiatives aimed at empowering designers with the knowledge and resources needed to integrate sustainable practices into their work. Notably, NFW also spearheads the Africa Fashion Frontier Incubator program, a holistic initiative designed to equip emerging designers with the skills and support necessary to thrive in the sustainable fashion landscape. Cultrite's expertise and innovative approach to sustainability, coupled with the Africa Fashion Frontier Incubator program, provide valuable insights and guidance, further bolstering NFW's efforts to drive sustainable change within the Kenyan fashion industry.



8. What efforts has Nairobi Fashion Week made to educate consumers about the importance of sustainable fashion and to encourage more responsible purchasing habits?

Nairobi Fashion Week (NFW) has undertaken various efforts to educate consumers about the significance of sustainable fashion and to foster more responsible purchasing habits. Through a multifaceted approach, NFW aims to raise awareness, inspire action, and empower consumers to make informed choices that align with sustainability principles.

One of the primary avenues through which NFW educates consumers is by integrating sustainability themes into its events and communications. Fashion shows, exhibitions, and panel discussions organized by NFW often feature discussions on sustainable fashion practices, highlighting the environmental and social impact of the fashion industry. By incorporating these topics into the fashion narrative, NFW seeks to spark conversations and prompt reflection among consumers about their purchasing decisions.

Moreover, NFW utilizes digital platforms and social media channels to disseminate information and resources related to sustainable fashion. Through engaging content, informative articles, and educational campaigns, NFW provides consumers with practical tips, resources, and insights to help them navigate the complexities of sustainable fashion and make more conscious purchasing decisions.

In addition to raising awareness, NFW actively promotes brands and designers that prioritize sustainability and ethical production. By showcasing collections and initiatives that exemplify sustainable practices, NFW not only highlights the importance of responsible fashion but also provides consumers with tangible examples of how sustainability can be integrated into the design and production process.

Furthermore, NFW collaborates with like-minded organizations and partners to amplify its educational efforts. Through partnerships with sustainability-focused brands, industry experts, and educational institutions, NFW expands its reach and impact, leveraging collective expertise to educate consumers and drive positive change within the fashion industry.



9. How does Nairobi Fashion Week engage with policymakers and industry stakeholders to advocate for more sustainable and ethical practices within the Kenyan fashion sector?

Nairobi Fashion Week (NFW) actively engages with policymakers and industry stakeholders to advocate for more sustainable and ethical practices within the Kenyan fashion sector. Ongoing engagement exists with the Kenya Fashion Council (KFCO), with collaborative efforts aimed at spearheading joint initiatives and advocacy campaigns. These endeavours target policymakers and industry stakeholders to raise awareness about the crucial importance of integrating sustainable practices into the fabric of the fashion sector. Together, NFW and KFCO emphasize the economic, social, and environmental benefits of sustainability, highlighting the need for collective action and policy support.

In addition to its engagement with KFCO, NFW participates in various industry events and forums, leveraging these platforms to amplify its advocacy message and engage with a diverse range of stakeholders.

Notably, NFW collaborates with key entities such as the Kenya Private Sector Alliance (KEPSA), particularly during significant events like the Circular Economy Africa Conference. Through partnerships with organizations like Sustainable Inclusive Business Kenya, NFW facilitates meaningful dialogues, fostering the exchange of ideas and catalyzing innovative solutions to address sustainability challenges in the fashion industry.

Furthermore, NFW fosters collaborations with associations, nonprofits, and academic institutions, contributing to knowledge-sharing and capacity-building initiatives aimed at driving positive change and nurturing a more sustainable fashion ecosystem in Kenya. Through these concerted efforts, NFW and its partners are dedicated to catalyzing a transformative shift towards sustainability and ethical practices within the Kenyan fashion industry, ultimately paving the way for a more responsible and resilient future.



10. What is the long-term vision of Nairobi Fashion Week in terms of sustainability, and how does the event plan to further promote eco-friendly and socially responsible fashion in Kenya?

The long-term vision of Nairobi Fashion Week (NFW) in terms of sustainability is to establish itself as Africa's premier sustainable fashion platform, leading the way in promoting eco-friendly and socially responsible practices within the Kenyan fashion industry. NFW aims to cultivate a culture of sustainability among designers, brands, and consumers, fostering a collective commitment to environmental conservation and ethical production.

To achieve this vision, NFW is dedicated to empowering designers and brands to embrace sustainability through education, support, and collaboration. By profiling NFW as Africa's sustainable fashion week, the event seeks to inspire designers to prioritize eco-friendly materials, ethical production methods, and innovative approaches to design. Through regular forums, panel discussions, and activations at the community level, NFW aims to raise awareness about the impact of fast fashion and advocate for more sustainable alternatives.

Moreover, NFW serves as a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) for all matters of sustainability, providing a centralized platform for industry stakeholders to collaborate, exchange ideas, and implement initiatives that promote sustainability. By convening stakeholders and facilitating dialogue, NFW seeks to drive collective action and amplify the impact of sustainability efforts within the fashion industry.

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

Learn More about Nairobi Fashion Week

VISIT NAIROBI FASHION WEEK



Credits

PHOTOGRAPHERS

Job Jobuh (@jobartography)

Asande Kimani Maoga
(@through_my_brothers_eyes)

Levi King Photography

DESIGNERS

Eva Wambutu

MOD HQ

Maisha By Nisria

Ina Design Roma

Deepa Dosaja



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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"Ideas are what make us human. Ideas do not get handed to us by elites, the rich or the powerful. Ideas are not bounded by colour, race, gender or religion."