

Kenyan Designers Transform Used Clothes into Runway Art with Upcycled Fashion

Published on 13 Oct 2025 | By IFI Correspondent



From Waste to Runway: Kenyan Designers Turn Trash into High Fashion

In a narrow alley cutting through Kenya's largest open-air market, models stride down a makeshift runway in bold, sculptural outfits—crafted not from silk or satin, but from discarded clothes rescued from dumpsites. The event, **Gikomba Runway Edition**, turned what was once seen as waste into a breathtaking showcase of creativity and conscience.

A Market Overflowing with Possibility

Every year, tonnes of used clothes from Europe, the United States, and beyond flood into Kenya. In 2023, the country surpassed Nigeria to become **Africa's largest importer of second-hand clothing**, according to a study by the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)**.

Much of it lands in **Gikomba Market** near central Nairobi — a sprawling five-acre maze of tin-roofed stalls that forms the heartbeat of the city's thrift trade. But not everything here finds a second wearer. Many bales contain clothes too damaged or poor in quality to resell. For most traders, they're just "garbage."

For a new generation of designers, however, that "garbage" is gold.

The Upcycled Revolution

Under the afternoon sun, a crowd gathers to watch models showcase upcycled streetwear, avant-garde silhouettes, and couture-grade craftsmanship. Among the standout names is **25-year-old designer Morgan Azedy**, whose label *Kenyan Raw* merges gothic aesthetics with environmental activism.

"I always see the environment around me dirty... I wanted to control pollution," Azedy tells AFP. His collection uses only recycled leather and repurposed denim — materials sourced from dumpsites and market rejects. The result? Structured streetwear infused with grit, rebellion, and purpose.

Another designer, **Olwande Akoth**, showcased elegant, upcycled kimonos. A former second-hand clothes trader, she recalls feeling disheartened by the poor quality of many imports.

“It’s just garbage... clothes you can’t even wear, you wouldn’t even give to a beggar,” she says.

Yet, through her designs, Akoth reimagines that waste into fluid garments that speak of renewal, identity, and resilience.

A Double-Edged Industry

Kenya imported nearly **197,000 tonnes of second-hand clothes worth \$298 million** in 2023 alone. But about a third of this ends up in landfills, most made from **non-biodegradable synthetics** like polyester and nylon.

The trade sustains hundreds of thousands of livelihoods — from port workers to vendors — but also chokes the local textile industry. A proposed regional ban by the **East African Community (EAC)** in 2016 aimed to boost domestic production, but strong opposition from U.S. trade lobbyists halted the move. Only **Rwanda** persisted, facing sanctions under the **African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)** — a trade deal now expired but under negotiation for revival.

Fashion as Protest and Pride

For Azedy and his peers, every creation is both statement and survival.

“Buying new fabric is too expensive,” he says. “But what others throw away — that’s where I find my uniqueness.”

On the Gikomba runway, oversized jeans become tiered jackets, torn skirts are reborn as flared trousers, and fragments of leather morph into futuristic corsetry.

His work has already crossed continents — from **Berlin Fashion Week** to styling regional musicians — and he now dreams of taking “Kenyan Raw” to Paris and New York.

The Future of African Upcycling

What’s happening in Gikomba is more than a fashion show — it’s a quiet revolution. It’s about reclaiming identity, redefining beauty, and proving that luxury doesn’t have to be new to be meaningful.

In the hands of Kenya’s young designers, fashion waste is no longer a burden. It’s a **canvas**. It’s **culture reimagined**. It’s **Africa’s creativity turning crisis into couture**.

For more style updates & exclusive fashion stories, follow [IndiaFashionIcon.com](https://www.IndiaFashionIcon.com)

DISCLAIMER: THE VIEWS/CONTENTS EXPRESSED/PRESENTED HEREIN, WITHIN THIS ADVERTORIAL AND PROMOTIONAL FEATURE ARE THE SOLE AND EXCLUSIVE RESPONSIBILITY OF INDIVIDUAL CLIENTS/EXPERT/THEIR AUTHORISED REPRESENTATIVE/VISHAL KHAIRNAR, TO WHICH EFFECT, PUBLICATION HOUSE/ITS REPRESENTATIVES/AFFILIATES ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE/LIABLE WHATSOEVER.