

Designing Kyabazinga's robe encouraged her to launch fashion house

Lillian Kyabaki's journey from a curious child and struggling art student to the designer behind the Kyabazinga's royal robe has grown into a thriving fashion business built on creativity, resilience and bold ambition.

BY EDGAR R BATTE

There was a time when little Lillian Kyabaki would walk to school, plucking flowers from fences. These flowers included morning glories, hibiscus, and tiny yellow blooms whose names she did not know.

While other children hurried along the road, she slowed down to notice her surroundings, driven by innocent curiosity.

She would question why flowers closed at certain hours, why the moon changed shape, and more.

In her tiny hands, she carried petals home and experimented with beauty in the only way a child knew how. Years later, those same curious eyes would help her build one of Uganda's admired bespoke fashion brands.

From science expectations to an artistic calling

At Gayaza High School, Kyabaki excelled in her science classes. Her family expected her to become a doctor or pursue another respected medical profession.

Art, on the other hand, was seen as uncertain, a path without stability or guaranteed income.

Then came a turning point; a school trip to the studio of celebrated Ugandan wildlife artist Taga Nuwagaba, which opened her eyes to a different kind of life. She remembers the lush compound, the monkeys in the trees, the ponds, the paintings of wildlife, and the calm atmosphere that felt almost unreal.

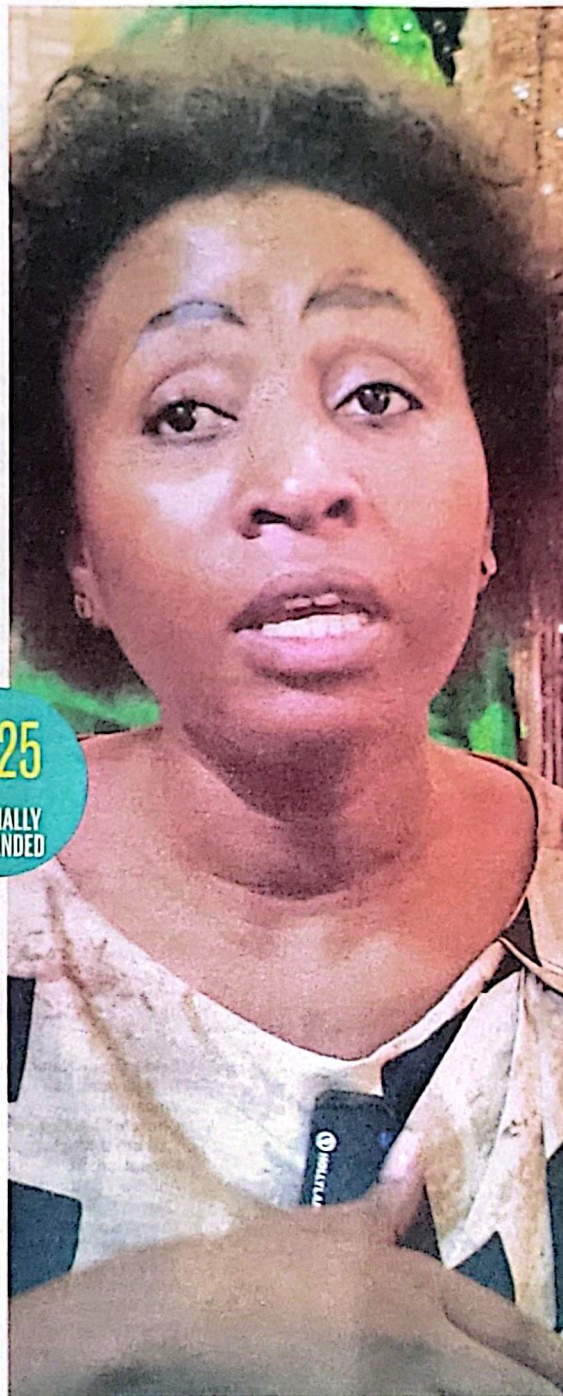
For the first time, she realised that she could actually become an artist.

Despite her science background, Lillian ultimately chose to study Industrial and Fine Art at Makerere University, a decision that worried her mother but ultimately changed her life.

Makerere: Where survival met creativity

At university, Kyabaki flourished. She sketched freely, surrounded by a creative circle that included photographer Oscar Ntege.

But life was not easy. Art materials



From designing bespoke gowns to creating the Kyabazinga's royal wedding robe, Kyabaki's work blends detail, discipline and a deep sense of artistry shaped by a journey that began with plucking wildflowers on her way to school.

creativity beyond the classroom. A lecturer's blunt warning, that no one would employ them, became a turning point.

If opportunities did not exist, they would have to create them.

To support herself, she became a background vocalist for musician Maurice Kirya, using music gigs to fund her education. At the same time, she began thinking of fashion more seriously.

The first stitch into fashion

Her entry into fashion was almost accidental. A friend asked her to make choir uniforms. She barely knew how to sew but she agreed anyway.

"I calculated and realised I would earn Sh350,000," she says. "At that time, that was serious money."

Her mother guided her through basic tailoring, and the uniforms were completed. That moment shifted everything, fashion stopped being a side idea and became a possibility.

A bold entry into Sylvia Owori's world

Seeking growth, Kyabaki walked into the fashion house of renowned designer Sylvia Owori, pretending she had an appointment.

Once inside, she confidently declared she deserved a job. When asked about salary, she boldly said Sh600,000.

She laughs at it now, but that confidence opened a door. At the workshop, she learnt the real structure behind fashion production, clients, fittings, deadlines and systems.

Even when she had no lunch money, she stayed late to learn.

"It is not just drawing dresses," she says. "It is finance, production, clients, deliveries, timelines and trust."

She eventually opened a small shop in Kabalagala, Kampala. There were no major clients at first, only determination and hope.

Then one day, a passer-by noticed her window display, walked in, and returned days later with singer Jackie Chandiru. That encounter changed everything. Soon she was designing for artists such as Desire Luzinda and Grace Nakimera, and her work gained visibility and artistic confidence.

Designing a royal moment

Her defining assignment came when she was commissioned to design a ceremonial robe for William Wilberforce Gabula Nadiope IV, the Kyabazinga of Busoga Kingdom. The task demanded deep research into royalty, symbolism and cultural identity. She studied royal garments across Uganda, debated colours and experimented with structure and movement.

She sourced velvet from Dubai and tested every detail to ensure balance and elegance.

"It had to sit properly without looking too stiff or too loose," she explains.

The final creation, a regal purple robe, became one of her most recognised works and elevated her standing in Uganda's fashion industry.

Building Naysa Bespoke

Today, her fashion house, Naysa Bespoke, employs more than 20 people. But for Kyabaki, leadership is about more than business growth. She describes her team as family, many of them navigating personal challenges while building livelihoods.

"I like to remind them where we are going. If everyone is pushing the cart in different directions, we cannot move," she says.

Earlier this year, she underwent surgery during a serious health scare. While

others feared the worst, she says she held on to quiet faith.

"I knew I would come out," she says simply.

The experience deepened her gratitude and strengthened her belief that her journey is not entirely her own doing. "There are days when you create something beautiful and you know a God is helping you," she reflects.

Mastery over noise

Despite her growing reputation, Kyabaki prefers the quiet of her atelier to public spotlight. She works closely with clients, designing each piece to reflect personality and identity. No two garments are ever the same.

"If we have not perfected something, I do not want to market it loudly," she says.

A bigger dream

Beyond her own brand, she envisions a stronger Ugandan fashion industry, one that competes globally and treats creativity as serious economic work.

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INSIDE NAYSA BESPOKE

Originally operating as Lillian Kyabaki Clothing, the brand recently rebranded to Naysa Bespoke as part of what Kyabaki describes as "a new era of bespoke elegance." The fashion house blends heritage tailoring with modern couture, creating custom garments for weddings, red carpets, boardrooms and ceremonial occasions. Every piece is designed through personalised consultations and crafted as a one-of-one creation.

Naysa Bespoke has dressed several Ugandan celebrities and public figures, including singer Halima Namakula and musician Maureen Nantume for major performances and events.