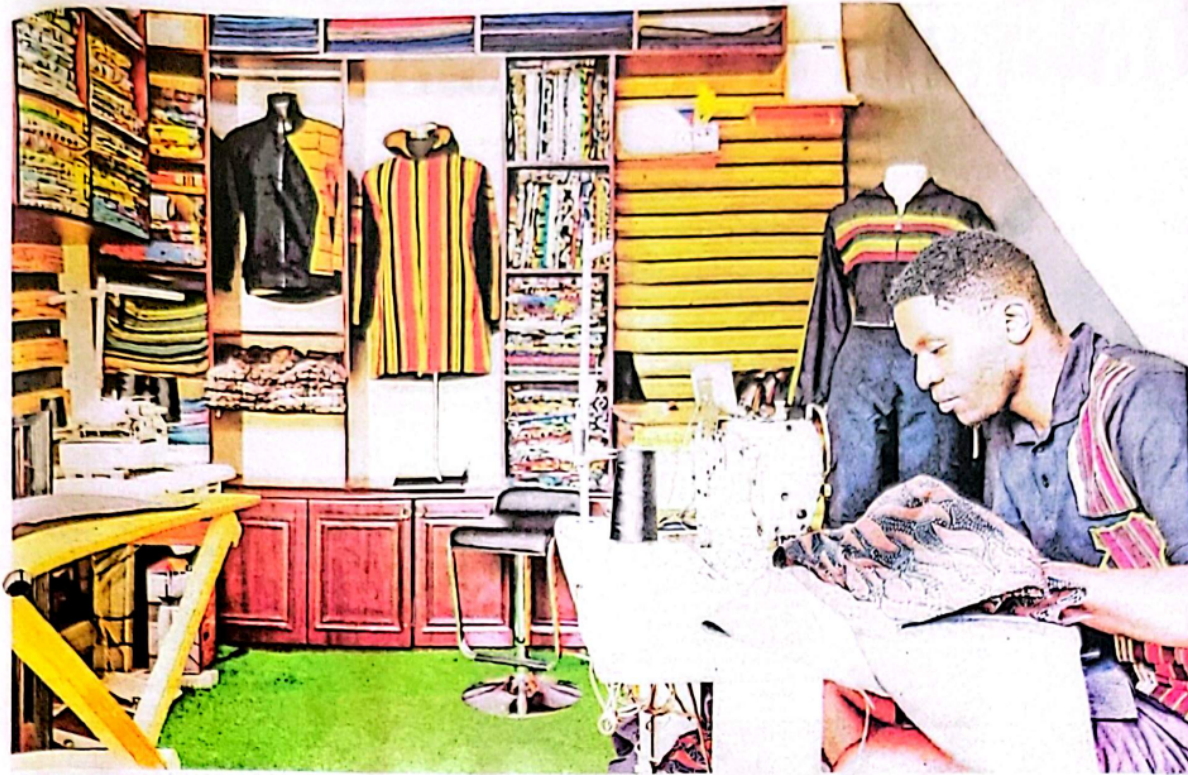


By turning *kikoi* into daily fashion, Steven Kasozi asks what it means to preserve culture in a changing world. PHOTO/TREVOR LUTALO

Kikoi like you have never seen before

Through his brand Kirkland Kampala, Steven Kasozi blends heritage with modern style, creating designs that celebrate culture while speaking to a new generation.

BY TREVOR LUTALO

At the recent Uganda One Festival at Kololo Independence Grounds in Kampala, local fashion brands showcased their take on contemporary Ugandan style. Among them, Kirkland Kampala stood out, presenting a striking mix of *kikoi* fused with denim and *kitenge* reworked into sharp, modern silhouettes. The pieces felt familiar yet unexpected, traditional fabrics worn not for ceremonies, but as everyday streetwear.

Behind the brand is designer Steven Kasozi, whose journey into fashion has been far from conventional. Through Kirkland Kampala, he challenges long-held perceptions of *kikoi*, transforming it from a ceremonial textile into a bold expression of daily fashion while paying tribute to Uganda's cultural

identity.

Reimagining a fabric with deep roots

For generations, *kikoi* has held a quiet but significant place in Ugandan culture. Traditionally worn beneath the gomesi, it appears during weddings or in cultural dance troupes. The fabric carries modesty, tradition, and family rituals, rarely seen outside ceremonial contexts.

Kasozi disrupts this narrative. By cutting *kikoi* into jackets and kimonos, pairing it with denim and contemporary fabrics, he shifts it from private and ceremonial into public and expressive wear. His designs preserve *kikoi*'s meaning, carrying its history into modern spaces where young people live, work, and create.

"I grew up seeing *kikoi* worn by my mother and grandmother during traditional functions," Kasozi explains. "It was never

just fabric. It carried memory, respect, and culture. I wanted to honour that history, but also allow it to speak to my generation."

A creative journey

Kasozi's path to fashion began in art. Drawn to painting, sketching, and the human figure, he imagined a future as an architect or professional artist. Fashion arrived later, but felt like an extension of those early creative instincts rather than a departure.

In 2016, during his Senior Six vacation, he had a three-month opportunity to learn basic fashion skills, including pattern cutting and manual sewing. What began as a short-term experience quickly grew into something more. His art background made it easier to understand form, proportion, and detail, skills that would later define his design approach.

A year later, he earned a government sponsorship to pursue a diploma in art and design at the National Teachers' College, Muni, in Arua District. While studying, he sewed as a side hustle, making shirts and dresses

for fellow students. Their appreciation and willingness to pay for his work was a turning point.

"When people started paying for what I made, I realised fashion was more than a hobby," he says. "It was another way of bringing ideas to life."

From university to streets

One early highlight was designing outfits for his university church choir's concert, which strengthened his confidence. After completing his diploma, he returned to Kampala and launched Kirkland Kampala in September 2018, setting up his first workshop near Owino Market.

Owino Market shaped his design philosophy. Fabric is never wasted there. Old denim, second-hand clothing, and leftover materials are constantly repurposed. This environment introduced Kasozi to upcycling, not as a trend, but as a practical and ethical way to make clothes.

"Sustainability became part of my process naturally," he says. "When you are surrounded by tailors who reuse everything, you learn to respect material."

This mindset blended seamlessly with *kikoi*, a fabric steeped in reuse, tradition, and longevity.

Kikoi to streetwear

Kasozi's innovation is not just in fabric choice, but in how he uses it. Rather than altering *kikoi* beyond recognition, he preserves its texture and patterns. The transformation happens in the cut.

THE FUTURE

In the next five to 10 years, Kasozi hopes Kirkland Kampala will stand as a leading sustainable Afro-modern fashion brand, elevating Ugandan textiles globally while empowering local communities. More importantly, he wants young people to embrace their identities boldly and authentically. "When someone wears my designs, I want them to feel pride," he says. "Pride in where they come from, and confidence in expressing it."

Structured jackets, oversized silhouettes, patchwork denim pairings, and clean tailoring give *kikoi* a modern edge. These clothes are designed for movement, festivals, creative spaces, and everyday city life, not museum displays or special occasions.

By placing *kikoi* in streetwear contexts, Kasozi challenges the idea that traditional textiles belong only in the past. He also questions whose culture it is, and where it should be seen.

"Culture should not only come out during ceremonies. It should be lived in, worn, and experienced every day," he says.

Dressing a new generation, Kirkland Kampala targets confident young people who value originality, identity, and craftsmanship. Kasozi designs for

those who see fashion as storytelling, people who understand where they come from and are intentional about where they are going.

His work has resonated with musicians and creatives such as Benon Mugumbya and Viboyo, whose brands blend tradition with contemporary expression. Through social media, runway showcases, and festivals, his designs have found a growing audience among Uganda's youth.

"This connection is intentional. If you want young people to value culture, you have to speak their language," he says. "For my generation, that language is streetwear."

Challenging perceptions

The journey has not been without resistance. Early on, Kasozi faced scepticism from both the community and industry. Fashion was often dismissed as an unserious career or seen as work for women. The idea of using *kikoi* in jackets and streetwear drew doubt.

"When I started, many people did not understand it," he says. "*Kikoi* was not seen as something you could wear outside traditional settings."

Initial reception was slow, and self-doubt was inevitable. But persistence, collaboration, and visibility through fashion shows and creative shoots shifted perceptions. Over time, what once felt unconventional became innovative.

Recognition and validation

A major turning point came in 2025, when Kasozi won Best Eco and Sustainable Fashion Designer of the Year at the Afriart Fashion Show. It was his first major runway show and award, affirming his creative direction.

"That moment changed how I saw my work," he says. "It made me trust my vision."

Since then, he has showcased at Ekikumba Carnival, Vvumbula Festival, and Uganda One Festival, sharing space with established designers and engaging with industry stakeholders.

Kampala shapes Kasozi's work. Its colour, chaos, resilience, and street energy are reflected in his textures and silhouettes. Markets, music festivals, and everyday street hustle provide constant inspiration.

"Kampala teaches you adaptability," he says. "It teaches you to be bold."

This influence ensures his designs, while speaking a global fashion language, remain unmistakably local.

Fashion as cultural continuity

Kirkland Kampala represents a broader cultural conversation. By turning *kikoi* into daily fashion, Kasozi asks what it means to preserve culture in a changing world. His work suggests culture survives not by being frozen, but by evolving with the people who carry it.

In a landscape where traditional textiles are often reduced to costume or nostalgia, Kasozi's designs insist on relevance, placing heritage on streets, stages, and in everyday life.