

Fairness in Fashion



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The Maasai warrior William Kikanae does not like New York. He misses the great outdoors. Even so, he is standing in front of me in a bustling sea of champagne-swilling fashionistas, inside a no-expenses-spared, architect-designed fashion boutique in Lower Manhattan. Through the huge windows overlooking Gansevoort Street, the evening sun casts golden rays across his face. He stares dreamily at the street, like an animal in a cage. Around his neck and wrists, colourful rows of bead necklaces and bracelets sparkle in red, blue, gold and green. He is wearing a shukan, a layer of fabric which covers his body. The fabric shines blood red against the white walls of the boutique. His arms are full of scars – the burn marks from the ritual a Maasai warrior has to undergo, a preparation for the pain and spilling of blood which awaits him. Killing a lion with a spear and sword is also part of the test a warrior has to face. This is something which Kikanae has also done. But he is not in New York to display the proof of his coming-of-age. He is here in the service of fashion - and, in particular, of Maasai women.

So what is a Maasai warrior doing at the grand opening of a fashion boutique? It is the Spanish shoe and bag brand, Pikolinos, which is celebrating the opening of its new pop-up store in New York – a two-storey boutique built from sustainable wood and materials. William Kikanae is here in his capacity as one of the driving forces behind a project between a non-government

organisation in Nairobi and a fashion label: a line of shoes and bags made in Kenya by Maasai women.

It isn't the first time that African culture has provided a source of inspiration for the fashion world: famous designers like Diane von Furstenberg, Yves Saint Laurent and Dries Van Noten are just some of the designers who have taken inspiration from the continent's rich colours and patterns. Now, it is time for the western world to give something back to the country and, more precisely, the Maasai people, one of the most threatened in the world. In Kikanae's view, women are the most important people in the family. It is women who look after the home and care for the children. They are also the most vulnerable. Strongly subordinate to men, most Maasai women have never earned a living. In most Maasai tribes, female circumcision (FGM) is a common practice, frequently associated with early marriage and the end of a girl's education. This is something which Kikanae is committed to changing.

– When I was young, I wanted to find ways to support women. They are the most important people in the family, says William Kikanae.

The fact that the fashion industry would become one way of providing a better life for more than 1,600 Maasai women in south-west Kenya was perhaps not what William Kikanae had envisaged when he started working with an NGO in Nairobi. For the past four years, he has been



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ABOVE In April this year, the Spanish shoe and bag brand Pikolinos opened a pop-up store in New York, selling several different collections of shoes featuring hand-embroidery by Maasai women in Kenya. The plan is for the boutique to stay open for three months, after which it's a case of wait and see.

RIGHT: It girl Olivia Palermo at the grand opening of the new Pikolinos boutique. She is the ambassador for the Maasai project, as well as the face of a campaign advertising the fourth line of the project. In October last year, during the campaign photo shoot, she visited Kenya and the Maasai women involved in the project.



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the driving force behind a partnership between Pikolinos and a non-government organisation called ADCAM, in which Maasai women use their knowledge of traditional crafts and beaded embroidery. The leather is sent from Spain to the Maasai women, who hand-embroider pieces of leather with colourful beads which are used on the company's sandals and bags. Once embroidered, the leather is transported back to Spain for final production. The result is a boho-chic collection of bags and leather sandals in different models which are sold worldwide by Pikolinos. All profits go to development projects in the Maasai Mara National Reserve.

The fashion partnership is a clear success story. Today, William Kikanae's dream has become a reality – through a collection of hand-embroidered leather accessories which have changed the lives of thousands of women in Kenya and Tanzania. For the first time ever, Maasai women are earning wages which will let them improve the quality of life for the whole community, at the same time as they remain true to their traditions and lifestyle. The project provides a stable source of income which gives them access to food and medicine, as well as to education for the youngest members of their tribes. The profits have also financed a school in the Masai Mara National Reserve. In one article, a Maasai woman tells how her wages have allowed her to send her daughter to university. At the same time, the partnership is keeping a dying culture



Maasai chief William Kikanee with his son in Kenya.

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PAMELA PEETERS

and tradition alive. The partnership has also proved a win-win in other respects: when a company puts natural resources and the people behind the objects first, they establish a relationship with shoppers which goes far beyond loyalty clubs and points for the last T-shirt you bought. Today's loyalty comes from the heart.

After It girl Olivia Palermo, the project ambassador, and Kikanee finished their talks to the now champagne-saturated audience, I headed for the exit. On the way out, I ran into another passionate soul – the sustainability strategist Pamela Peeters, who originally came from Belgium. Peeters has been working with sustainability issues for 15 years, and has visited Pikolinos' production set-up in Kenya. She sees this as the perfect example of the successful fashion labels of the future:

– Fashion is avant-garde, just like a movie. You set a tone, you have the opportunity to change people. Most of them buy an image. But sustainability is not an image, it is a lifestyle. Stella McCartney did it, and I have a couple of pairs of her "vegan shoes". Pikolinos is another trend-setter. You are forced to consider your whole lifestyle and lifecycle analysis, the people who plant the cotton, who harvest it, who make the products. If everyone is shown respect, consumers will feel better, says Pamela Peeters.

A simple way to decide whether a fashion label is fair or not is not to look just for the traditional fairness labelling and obvious logos. In Pamela Peeters view, the body's intelligence is a measure of which fashion labels have fully embraced today's awareness. It is enough to wear their collections.

– The skin is the largest organ of the body, it can feel when something is genuine.

Now I understand what she means. A while ago, I bought my first pair of Pikolinos shoes, and I don't just feel that I look good in them. They are also the most comfortable sandals I own. In addition, the overall experience has another silver lining: my new shoes contribute, even slightly, to making the world a better place. Fairness is trendy!



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