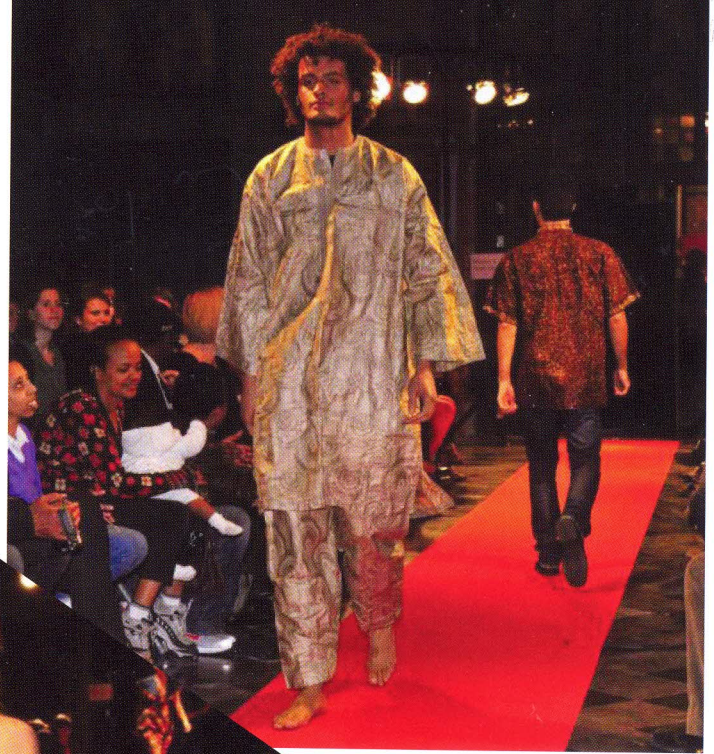
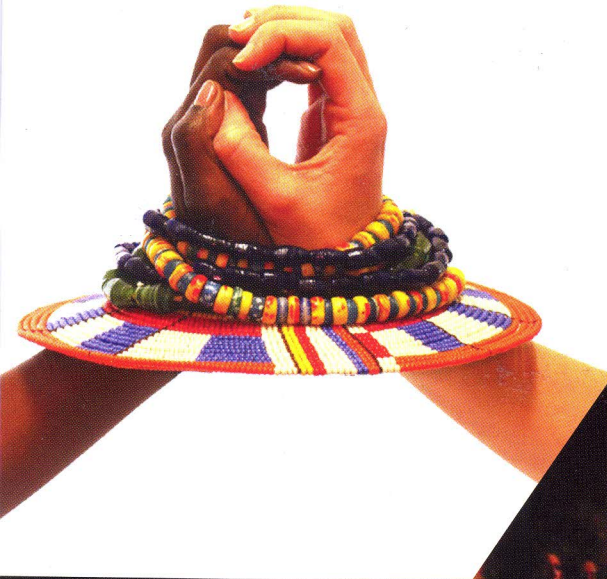


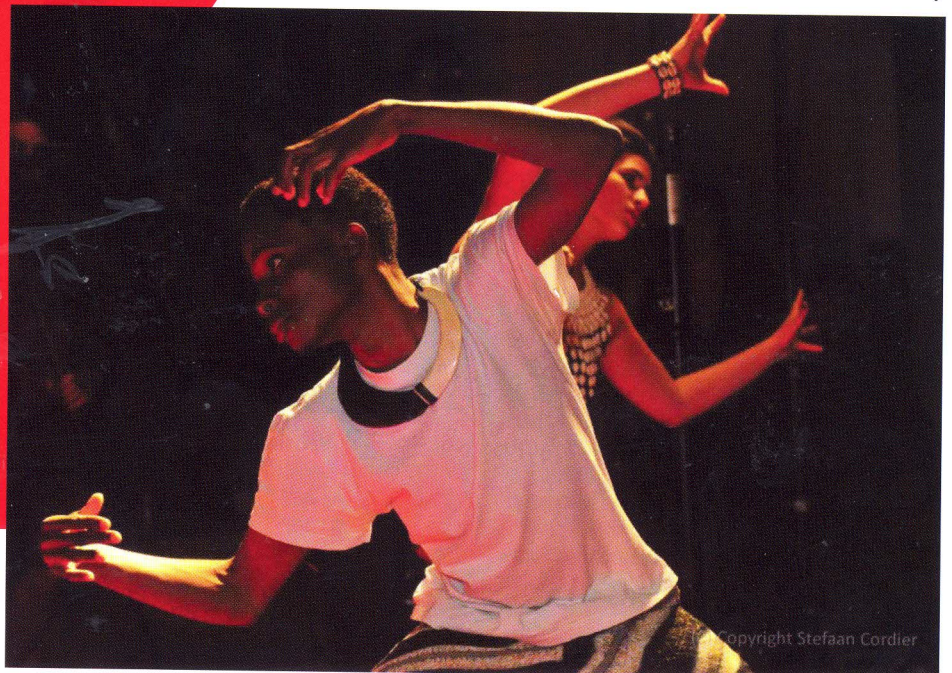
UMOJA FASHION SHOW

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY THROUGH FASHION



By Jessika Nilsson

Two years ago, a group of KU Leuven students dressed in anything African that Katrien Rennemeier and Diane Birungi could find, walked an improvised catwalk (i.e., a wood platform that vibrated with every step) through a packed crowd at Pangaea. It was fun and relaxing, but most importantly, the audience had made Diane and Katrien's point: you can bridge cultural gaps through fashion. The African Film Festival heard about the students' initiative and wanted to team up for an even larger fashion show, since the show aligned with its mission. This led to last year's professionally choreographed UMOJA Fashion Show at the University



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Top: Vice Rector of International Policy Bart De Moor.
Left: Founders Katrien Rennemeier and Diane Birungi.

Museumzaal, where the Vice Rector of International Policy, Bart De Moor, gave the opening speech as the guest of honour.

Founders and organizers Katrien and Diane, both KU Leuven graduate students, have vowed to stick to the concept of 'a fashion show for students and by students'. Diane hails from Uganda, and Katrien, a Belgian, grew up in Tanzania. Both bring a unique and complementary set of skills to create an intercultural team. Led by its core principle of celebrating diversity through fashion, UMOJA breaks stereotypes about Africa, culture, and the fashion world. The UMOJA approach to fashion is an empowering one, reminding us that beauty comes in all shapes and sizes. UMOJA strives to change the horrible stereotypes we can find in the fashion world about the 'perfect' size and beauty.

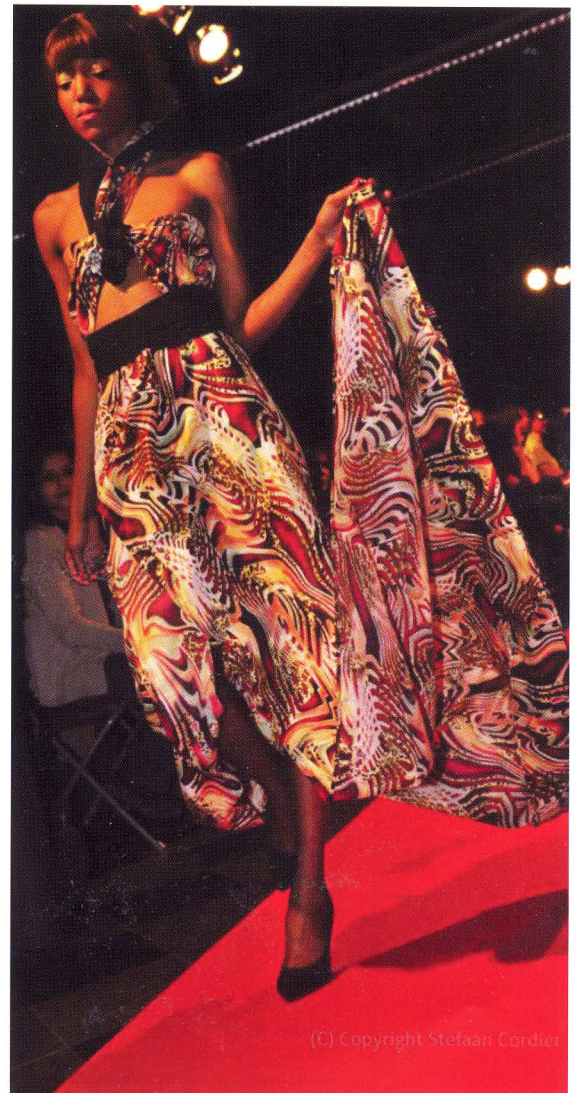
Last year, about 500 guests saw students modelling outfits by seven professional African but European-based designers from Berlin, Brussels, and Antwerp, among other cities. This year, the organizers promise to make the show even more exciting. In partnership with the African Film Festival, KU Leuven Intercultural Office, Pangaea, and different student organizations, the UMOJA Fashion Show will take place on **14 March at 8 p.m.** in **Museumzaal** (Naamsestraat 22, Leuven), a day before the film festival and Leuven Participation Week start. Tickets are on sale at Pangaea and include welcome drinks and an African Film Festival movie screening at Cinema ZED or Kinopolis.

In February, UMOJA cast the show's models, women and men from different cultural and racial backgrounds. The student models are trained by a professional catwalk coach to help them relax, grace the catwalk, and showcase over seven professional designers of uniquely selected collections with African themes. A crew of lighting technicians, photographers, and professional hair and make-up artists are also in place to complete the image.

While the show is a fun-filled hour with lights, colours, fashion, and music, Katrien stresses that the event aims to bring people from all over the world together in a creative multi-cultural setting. Diane strongly believes that there is still a lot to be learned about Africa, its fashions, and its cultures, and that stereotypes all too often leave people in the dark. Thus, although UMOJA is an African fashion show, it will always remain one that welcomes and connects all nationalities.

UMOJA is as African as it is global, and it is a source of inspiration for creative people from all over the world. Michael, a philosophy student who premiered on the runway last year, describes his experience: "Unlike the circumstances that surround the word *umoja*, the resiliency for the emancipation of the African community, this coined African expression goes beyond its literal meaning: 'Unity' in Swahili, to stem a threshold for togetherness, a stronghold for dynamic diversities, a springboard for unique change, and a landmark for innumerable facets of creative minds...amongst others, to all and sundry. As a result, I am honoured and elated to be part of this forum!"

Personally, UMOJA has spurred me in creative terms. Having walked the runway the last two years, I have now gotten behind the sewing machine and fused East African fabrics with classic colonial/safari gear. With anthropologists in mind, I created the fashion brand *Ethnography*. I'm proud to be a part of the UMOJA family and hope to welcome you to this year's fashion show.



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