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IMPRESSIONS

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Syrian Celluloid

Behind the scenes of a fledgling film industry

Kyrgyzstan Adventure

Families throw open their doors to tourism

Highly Developed

Property investment in Lebanon, Syria, Sudan and Jordan

Trendy Tbilisi

New venues energizing the Old Town

UP IN SMOKE

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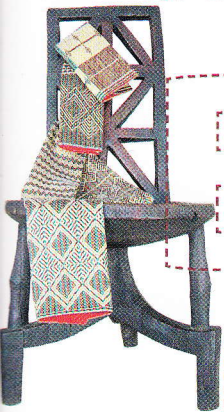
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Building a Lifestyle Brand for Ethiopia



Words Robb Young

“I started by making and selling kitchen aprons,” smiles Sara Abera from a tidy atelier filled with rustic timber looms. “My first big job was to design and supply festive gowns to about 500 children between the ages of four and 11, orphaned by war. They were stationed in a camp far away from Addis Ababa, awaiting the chance to be adopted.”

“As a fresh, young designer, I was so happy to be selected to undertake this project. I stayed among these constantly smiling, innocent faces for more than a week. I was so attached to them that when I completed my mission and had to leave the camp, tears came to my eyes.”

Touched by such powerful realities so close to home, Abera’s interest in adding an ethical dimension to fashion enterprise was cemented early on. Nearly two decades later, she has come full circle and launched Muya, a lifestyle brand that preserves an endangered indigenous craft, empowers her workers and offers a practical model for sustainable development in African industry.

Abera’s business origins were not humble: born to



Sara Abera

well-to-do parents in the coffee export business, Abera grew up playing with foreign and local tribal children in a melting-pot settler town called Dembi Dollo. Besides Amharic and her native Oromifa, Abera soon picked up Greek from the neighbours and would speak English in her classes at the American Mission School. “We were only 35 kilometres from Gambella and the aesthetic sense of the people there, the Masango and others, had an important influence on me. Young girls fashioned skirts out of leaves that they’d collect in the forest, and wear them with beads.”

After moving to Addis Ababa to study pattern cutting as a teenager and following a few design courses in Greece, Abera embarked on a career path not so typical for an educated young woman from Ethiopia’s interior. Headstrong, she refused help from her family and with a single sewing machine and 14 Birr (less than one pound) in her pocket, Abera created the foundations for her company, Sara Garment Designers & Manufacturers, which she would open in 1989. →



“MUYA TEXTILES HAVE REACHED SOME OF THE MOST UPMARKET SHOPS AROUND THE WORLD – IN NEW YORK, TOKYO, ATHENS, VIENNA AND ZURICH”

“A very close friend of mine asked me to make a jacket for her; she was so happy and excited by this jacket that she started recommending me to the large, female ex-patriot community in Addis Ababa, who eventually became my customers,” recalls Abera. Among her clientele today she counts the wives of at least three African Heads of State, Prime Ministers and the majority of the female diplomats and diplomats’ wives in Addis Ababa.

Her new brand Muya, which means ‘creativity’ in Amharic, was born out of diversifying a single iconic component of traditional Ethiopian dress, the hand-woven *tibeb* border which is found on traditional shamma robes for men and *kamis* for women. For centuries, the multi-coloured *tibeb* patterns have framed the white gauzy wraps and served as a pictorial narrative of tales that only the weavers are said to understand.

“During the past few years, realising that the worldwide trend was towards handicrafts, I decided to develop this tradition and present to the rest of the world the beautiful work of anonymous but hardworking and very talented craftsmen,” says Abera.

By making small adjustments on the looms and adding new colour schemes to the *tibeb*, Abera was able to create soft furnishings such as pillows, runners, throws, table settings and dinner sets. Everyday household objects refined with the finesse of an instinctive tastemaker. Adapting the cloth’s dimensions and design alone was not enough to make a viable business out of the *tibeb* however.

Weaving in Ethiopia is a cottage industry traditionally done by men from home. Quality control and management over the scattered weavers would have been a thorn in the side of developing an international

product had Abera not opened an atelier to assemble and re-train local weavers. Next on the agenda was closing the gap between a very local product and global consumers. The marketing, distribution and sales barriers to overcome for a fledgling brand on the fringes of fashion were formidable but Abera was resourceful and took advantage of business training seminars aimed at developing sectors in her region.

The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) selected Abera to attend a SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) seminar at the University of Durham in 2003 and shortly after she was invited to Washington DC by the Corporate Council of Africa under the American government’s AGOA initiative (African Growth and Opportunities Act). It was at the UN sponsored event where she made contacts that ultimately led to a collaborator who has since expanded both her product range and distribution network.

“Sara and I met in the beginning of my stay in Ethiopia through my textile research at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University. She’s a pioneer in traditional textile design and was introduced to me through a consultant working for UNIDO,” explains Arnold Haas from a booth where he’s displaying his Wubet range of handbags during *Première Classe*, the leading accessories trade show at Paris fashion week. “I’m exclusively using textiles from Muya. The most important part of my design is to reinvent the European *savoir-faire* in using Ethiopian textiles and to modernise them for high-end fashion boutiques.” Through Haas’ handbags, Muya textiles have already reached some of the most upmarket shops around the world – from Club 55 in Saint Tropez to designer shops in New York, Tokyo, Athens, Vienna and Zurich. →

Jim Tew, a leading specialist in textiles at Klout Ltd, who assisted the UK office of UNIDO last year, assesses fair trade issues and organic accreditation of textile products in the region. "I was immediately impressed by the concept of taking the local craft weavers and helping them to work in improved conditions and enabling them to find a higher value market for their products. Also, Sara's dedication was obvious."

In an era with socially conscious brands like Edun (spearheaded by U2's Bono and his wife, Ali Hewson) reigning high on fashion's trend barometer and when the industry has finally begun to go Green, being accountable to socially and environmentally responsible enterprise has almost entered the mainstream. "The most important aspect is that there is no exploitation, the whole project, while obviously needing to be commercial to be sustainable, has the main interest of trying to improve the working conditions and opportunities of the participants," says Tew. It's auspicious timing for Abera. While she may see her project as common sense, it's a business model that couldn't be more attractive to today's fashion buyers and consumer.

Still, Abera sees the big picture very clearly. "By giving the craftspeople the respect that they deserve, as well as the means to keep their ages-old traditions intact, there's a precious inheritance to future generations. The broader objective is to raise their standard of living. Potters, wickers doing the basketry elements, blacksmiths who make our silver parts and so on – these are talented people who in the past were outcast."

"I work in Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya and Muya's atelier is among the nicest I've seen. I don't think Africa can be the low-cost producer in many categories so Muya is smart to focus on high quality and slightly higher prices. The challenge will be to stay ahead of (or at least even with) countries like India and Vietnam who also have great textiles and a long tradition of quality and appealing designs," says Liz Wald of New York based Economic Development Imports, who will begin distributing Muya and Wubet products next year to niche shops in the States.

Rejuvenating the local textile industry and making traditional crafts relevant to modern consumers' lives are only a part of Abera's drive. "Unless we create a market for them, by designing useful products out of the materials the weavers produce, their skills could someday be lost," she adds.

Already in many African countries, the textile industries are either suffering or near collapse despite NGO and bi-lateral initiatives to bolster production and nurture the sector. Trademarking genuine African textiles in the global market is becoming harder too. Many textiles with alleged indigenous print sold to Africans who use local dressmakers to create tunics and wraps (particularly in the west and south of the continent) are manufactured in Asia and sometimes the prints are even designed in Europe. For example, traditional *kente* cloth, originally from the Ashanti in Ghana is now printed and reproduced in Korean factories and subsequently used in Afrocentric t-shirts and caps worn by Black Americans to show their pride of Africa. The ironies of African textiles don't stop here. When global fashion and luxury brands such as Gucci or Dior do African themed ranges or seasons, the prints and textiles are appropriated into their designs but Africa sees no benefit back from this cultural borrowing.

Abera anticipates that significant changes are within reach if other entrepreneurs on the continent were more inventive in adapting their rich palette of traditional arts and design. "Exposing these crafts to a large number of buyers will enhance their commercial value and exported volumes, which in turn will force governments to pay more attention, to help expand the sector by introducing meaningful incentives to would-be local or foreign investors."

But if you can't wait until her contemporaries catch up with Abera's cultivated approach to making modern Abyssinian products from an ancient pedigree, next time you fly into Addis Ababa's shiny international airport, look up. Colossal hand-woven Muya tibeb banners greet you, a reminder that at any moment inspiration could be staring you in the face.

Muya is available at the airside duty free shops of the Terminal Building of the Addis Ababa International Airport, the Addis Ababa Sheraton Hotel and selected boutiques worldwide. For enquiries contact, muyaethiopia@ethionet.et



"THERE IS NO EXPLOITATION, THE WHOLE PROJECT HAS THE MAIN INTEREST OF TRYING TO IMPROVE THE WORKING CONDITIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS"

