Best feet forward

A new generation of Ethiopian fashion entrepreneurs is changing perceptions as well as creating jobs, writes DEIRDRE MCQUILLAN, by tapping the potential of global markets.

THE SPRAWLING CITY of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital and home to almost four million people, is not the most obvious location for a flourishing global fashion company. It’s a long way from Los Angeles, where the cool footwear styles created by a young Ethiopian entrepreneur and sold on the internet became an overnight hit with thousands of hip American urbanites. When Bethlehem Alemu created Sole Rebels in 2005, making shoes from worn-out truck tyres in Addis Ababa’s poorest and most disadvantaged area, she became one of the country’s most remarkable international success stories.

Everybody knows about Alemu in Addis. Her commitment to development and trade has made the 30-year-old an inspirational figure at home and abroad. In March, she was selected as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum; this week she joined Archbishop Desmond Tutu as a speaker at the WWF 50th anniversary conference in Switzerland. Her fans include Hillary Clinton and the president of the World Bank.

If Ethiopia has one foot in the past and one in the future, that’s literally the case with Sole Rebels. Truck-tyre sandals have a long history in the country. They were used by soldiers fighting the Italian invasion in the 1930s and more recently by victorious rebel guerrillas who swept into Addis in 1991 and are now in government. In a city currently undergoing something of a building boom, where nothing goes to waste, cleared sites are diligently harvested – old bricks, doors, windows and flooring neatly stacked for reuse. Recycling is a way of life.

The company’s “factory”, a small, lean-to building on the outskirts of the city, is reached by a barely navigable dirt track. The day of our visit, workers were busy completing an order for 3,000 pairs of shoes for Amazon.com, men doing the footbed assembly and women stitching the uppers. In her tiny, cramped office, Bethlehem, a trained accountant and mother of three young children, explains earnestly why she started. “I wanted to do something for myself and my family and give the people in my neighbourhood an opportunity to work. There were women doing beautiful embroidery, but nobody came to support them.”

She designs the shoes, keeping tabs on international styles and studying what other brands are doing. Flip-flops, lace-ups and loafers are all made by hand with indigenous materials such as Abyssinian leather, handspun cotton and jute, using traditional craft skills. With names such as Class Act, Open Up Tribal and Easy Riding, they are colourful and fun with a style all of their own and sell for around $45 (€30) on Amazon.com and Spartoo.com.

Her first big break came after receiving Fairtrade certification when she hounded US buyers with emails and samples. Urban Outfitters was the first to place an order, for 2,500 pairs. “It was really hard work, putting everything together, making sure sizing and colours were right. Then Amazon saw our shoes and gave us an order. Now we are doubling our production each year,” she says, proudly.

The company, which employs 75 full- and 120 part-time workers and uses 200 suppliers, can produce 500 pairs of shoes a day. “We have hands, not machinery,” says Alemu, whose husband and three brothers help out on marketing, production and accounts. Turnover for 2011 is expected to be €500,000. Its growth has not only brought jobs to Zenabwok, a former leper colony, but has transformed the psyche of the formerly stigmatised community.

Her success is also changing perceptions about Ethiopia as a starving, aid-dependent country.

“Before, we waited for people to come and save us – now people are saving themselves. One woman used to wash clothes, going from house to house, struggling to feed her two children. She had sewing skills but no opportunity to use them, so now she sews for us and her children are at school, so her life has changed. We can solve our own problems with our own materials and with our own people. Trade is a key to Africa’s development,” she insists, repeatedly emphasising the fact that one job can support up to five people.

At a small weaver’s shed in the village, we meet the workers who supply some of the fabric and embroideries for Sole Rebels, many of whom are leprosy survivors.

“Bethlehem has made a big difference to us,” says Birke, the manager. “We would have had to close down without her. She is our sole support. We have no other sales. She has given us work and hope.”
Alemu’s next step will be to open a state-of-the-art factory with the ambition of employing 5,000. With her quiet determination and boundless capacity for hard work, it’s only a question of time before she realises her dream and Sole Rebels becomes, as she puts it, “the Adidas of Africa”.

FROM POLITICAL SCIENTIST TO SARTORIALIST

SOLE REBELS IS NOT the only Ethiopian company with growing international fashion credentials. Sammy Abdella’s business is booming, selling Ethiopian accessories to the US, France, Italy and Japan from his workshop in Addis Ababa, a favourite haunt of well-heeled ex-pats and NGO workers.

Here the cotton is spun, dyed, woven and embellished by workers using traditional skills to make wraps, gabbis (traditional Ethiopian shawls), tunics, scarves and cushion covers in a range of colours and patterns geared to western taste. He employs 150 full-time weavers, each job supporting up to five people.

With a Master’s degree in political science from the US, Abdella’s original ambition was to become a diplomat, but on returning to Ethiopia in 2000 at the encouragement of his mother, he realised his passion for craft could lead him in other equally satisfactory directions.

“You know what, I thought, if I had my own business, I am my own diplomat,” he says with a grin when we meet. “I am promoting my country this way, I am putting a positive image on it plus I get to travel. I always wanted to do something that was socially responsible, so this is a win-win for everybody.”

From a small start using one weaver and helped by his architect sister and his mother as designer, some samples were made up. His first order in 2004 was from Toast, a luxury, UK-based mail-order catalogue company that has 150,000 on its mailing list. It continues to be a steady customer. He points to a stack of gabbis in natural dyes ready for dispatch to the UK and shows how they are styled for catalogues.

The US Agency for International Development helped him export by sponsoring a couple of trade events and in 2008, he hooked up with a former fashion buyer for Barneys, Holly Hikido, who travels widely in France and Italy and advises on colour trends and styles in New York.

Barneys is now his biggest customer with orders for up to 1,000 pieces per season. He also shows at Paris Fashion Week twice a year and supplies Merci, the trendy new Paris emporium with scarves and throws. Edun, an ethical label part-founded by Bono, has also been a customer for fabric. His next move is to expand homewares and work from a showroom in New York.

“Hand-spinning cotton has become a lost craft so this is one way of sustaining it. Most of these women have traditional skills. Earning an income gives them self-confidence – they don’t want anything but work. People don’t believe it when they see the products are from Ethiopia so you are not only selling products, you are promoting your country.”

Deirdre McQuillan acknowledges the support of the Simon Cumbers Media Fund in researching this article

EXPORTING NATIVE CRAFTS AND TEXTILES

IN MUYA’S PEACEFUL headquarters in a leafy area of the city, founder and award-winning fashion designer Sarah Abera reinterprets traditional handmade products for export, but complains that Ethiopia’s “famine” image is a pervasive hindrance to development. She spent nine years traversing this huge landlocked country, visiting different tribes, collecting samples of weaving, pottery and silver from ecclesiastical robes and icons to shawls and jewellery.

“I concentrated on craft because next to farming, it makes a contribution to the economy,” she says. “This country has been isolated, it has never been colonised, so everything is intact and people know how to make things.”

Her first export order worth $11,000 (£7,400) was to the US. “It was the big excitement of my life,” she recalls. In 2005 she moved to her present location, a former government building, and spent nearly a year renovating it to create an enticing sales environment for her wares and a workshop for staff. “We brought the weavers here. They were marginalised people who could not afford to be creative because they had to sell. So here they are free to experiment,” she says. “We don’t teach them how to weave. We only teach them contemporary styles and colour combinations.” Now most of her production is exported to the US, Israel, France and Japan.

Her business partner is textile specialist Jacques du Bois, an authority on Ethiopian crafts whose involvement goes back to emperor Haile Selassie’s time. They started to work together after collaborating on the interior decoration of Addis Ababa’s smart new airport terminal.

“There is great interest in African crafts,” she says, “but we need money to expand and if we want to get to international level, it has to be a political decision because craft has been marginalised. There is no school, no academy. There are 70,000 weavers in Addis. Imagine if you brought these guys into the market. How it would change their life. It’s a resource better than oil.”