

ALL ABOUT
LIYA

SHY AND MODEST, ETHIOPIA'S LIYA KEBEDE HAS
NONETHELESS TURNED HERSELF INTO ONE OF THE WORLD'S
MOST SUCCESSFUL MODELS. NOW SHE IS USING HER
PROFILE TO HIGHLIGHT ISSUES CLOSE TO HER HEART

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AS SHE SWEEPS INTO SANT

AMBROEUS, Manhattan's currently-hot Upper East Side restaurant, Liya Kebede, bare-faced and beautiful, is turning heads. With her delicate, honey-coloured face and long, lithe body of gazelle-like proportions, she has sold everything from couture and lipstick for Chanel to diamonds for Tiffany and lingerie for Victoria's Secret. Even without any make-up, with messy, bird's nest hair and in shapeless sweats, Kebede is hard to miss.

The Ethiopian supermodel made global headlines when she became the first black face of Estée Lauder and has peered out of enough glossy covers to be ranked by *Forbes* as one of the world's highest paid models. Since 2005, the 32-year-old mother of two has been a World Health Organisation Goodwill Ambassador, striving to raise awareness of the health risks new mothers and infants face in the developing world. She started her own charity with a similar mission and was recently named among *Time's* 100 Most Influential People, alongside Barack Obama and

Bill Clinton. Now she has set her sights on sustainable fashion.

Sinking into the velvet chairs, she looks out of place among the monied, martini-swilling clientele and more like a cool downtown New Yorker. The elegant Milanese café is her local, she says, "where she brings the kids for dessert". She lives in Carnegie Hill, a grand Upper East Side neighbourhood on the edge of Central Park steeped in old-world glamour.

Kebede could have easily been swept away by her successes. Even before her career started skyrocketing, she was exploring ways to improve the lives of others. "Growing up in Africa surrounded by poverty makes you want to do something. That feeling never left me," she says in her soft, silky accent. "I'm humbled to be in a position to make a difference."

It's clear that she cares deeply. When we share stories about Aids orphans, her sultry, cow-like eyes well up in tears. There is a delicacy about her features, but also a sorrowful quality to her loveliness of someone absorbed with worldly concerns. >



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Yet though Kebede has lived in Manhattan for over a decade, she makes regular trips to Addis Ababa. It was on one of those jaunts that she got the idea for her chic, handmade clothing line, Lemlem.

"The weavers are all men while women do the spinning and sewing. We have thousands of them in the city and they live in appalling conditions. I promised to help. I didn't know how," she adds with a giggle. "So I started Lemlem, it means to bloom, or when something is lush and green and fertile. We employ local artisans to preserve this ancient art while creating modern, wearable pieces."

She hopes it will mark a sea change for her country. "It's tricky trying to make aid sustainable. I love the saying: 'Teach a man how to fish instead of giving him fish'. It's vital that we help the workers become independent, to break their cycle of poverty. This is a different sort of helping that not only helps weavers but the industry as a whole. It also gives the Western market something beautiful from a different world."

Swivelling around to show me her bag, a summery, ethnic-print cotton number from the new collection, she exudes a childlike enthusiasm. "Some of the products are hand-spun, which gives them a soft, luxurious feeling." As she explains it, Lemlem, originally a children's range, was inspired by her kids "because I enjoy dressing up them more than I do myself". The line has since blossomed to include womenswear and accessories, simple, embroidered cotton dresses, tunics and shawls, and is one of the few ethical ranges to make it into high-end boutiques such as Matches and Barneys.

Over lunch, beneath the giant Art Deco chandeliers, she talks quietly about life, love, politics, the joys of motherhood and her remarkable trajectory from a shy, skinny young girl in Ethiopia to the international catwalks. In 2002, French *Vogue* put her on the cover, declaring fashion was 'All About Liya', dedicating an entire issue to her after the editor saw her in Tom Ford's Gucci show. *Vogue Italia* followed with its 'All Black' issue with Kebede as the star. Suddenly she was everywhere and her exoticism was celebrated.

Her rise began when Gucci creative director Ford, turning out to be something of a fairy godfather, hand-picked the budding model for an Yves Saint Laurent campaign during a Milan catwalk show. The first time they met, 10 years ago, Ford was mesmerised not only by her beauty but her big-heartedness: "I was casting models and Liya came in. She looked me in the eyes, and I was quite literally stunned. She projects an aura of goodness and calm, and later that day when



FASHION SENSE: this picture and opposite page, Liya's own range, Lemlem, is handmade in Addis Ababa

trying to remember what she looked like, I could only fulfil her eyes."

Kebede was brought up in Addis Ababa with three older brothers, her mother was a PR for a small company and her father worked for Ethiopia Airlines. At 18, she was spotted in Addis Ababa and whisked off to Paris, lured by the hope of making money for college. "I wanted to get an education in the West." But feeling lost and homesick, she gave up. Looking back, she says: "It was hard and soul destroy'r g. I went to castings with hundreds of girls, all long, blonde and beautiful, and I thought I'd never get any work."

She fell back into modelling after running out of money while visiting one of her brothers in Chicago. "I found an agency and did catalogue stuff. It was full-on. I'd have to take the Greyhound bus to Michigan at four in the morning."

At some point, she had to escape this twilight world of catalogue shoots and cattle calls. "I had to decide if I really wanted to do this, so I went to New York."



Matt Jones / Irish South Management / www.itsmarchive.com; Getty

PASSING ON THE BATON: above, Liya Kebede with 1990s supermodel Waris Dirie, whom she plays in the upcoming film *Desert Flower*; top right, with her financier husband Kassay Kebede

During a trip home to see her family in 2000, Kebede met her future husband Kassay, an Ethiopian financier 20 years her senior. "We met in a bar at a New Year's party," she recalls, her eyes sparkling. "He was living in London and I was in New York. Within months, we moved in together, got married. It was all so fast. When you know, you know." She once remarked that, if she had to be reincarnated, she would want to come back as herself, so she could meet her husband all over again.

The couple set up home in New York and around the same time Kebede signed a £1.65 million contract with Estée Lauder. Not long after, in 2004, she caught Hollywood's attention and took a small role in *Lord of War* with Nicolas Cage and *The Good Shepherd*, a Robert De Niro film, which she describes as magical. "He was amazing... intimidating," she says of De Niro.

Everything was happening at dizzying speed and, a year later, she took a step back. "Having children changes you," she muses. "It makes you less selfish and you start to see the world differently. You want to know that your kids will be OK, the environment will be OK." ▶





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She talks quite longingly about the freedom of her own childhood and the beauties of Africa. She was "a wild thing, a tomboy," who loved nature and adventure and "roaming in the big, wide spaces" under "vast blue skies. There is nothing like an African sky, the light and the stars, the silence". It was when she returned home that she became involved in bringing attention to the global maternal-mortality crisis. "As a mother and an Ethiopian, this issue hits close to home. I gave birth to my two children in New York in the best possible conditions. In Ethiopia, as in most developing countries, many women give birth alone," she explains. "There's a saying in Africa: 'To find out you're pregnant is to have one foot in the grave.'"

She tells a story of a young woman who started bleeding while delivering her first child. "In these rural villages there are no roads or electricity, let alone hospitals. The whole village carried her to hospital, but she died on the way. When, in a small, remote community like that, a mother dies, it affects everyone."

She seems gentle and grounded, a stark contrast to the flamboyant, flashy characters that inhabit the fashion industry. "Fashion has always given me a platform and exposed me to inspiring people. It's allowed me to do something quite amazing."

It was perhaps inevitable that Kebede would go from the catwalk to the silver screen. Earlier this summer, she was at Cannes promoting her first starring role in a film, *Desert Flower*, based on the bestselling autobiography by Waris Dirie, a former 1990s Somali supermodel, who, after enduring circumcision and forced marriage, escaped to London and rose to fame.

Kebede is earnest about her work, but at the same time she's fresh, whimsical and doesn't take herself too

seriously. "The response in Cannes was wonderful and so unexpected. People were so moved. I love acting and every day I looked forward to being on set. You explore a different side of yourself, it's so emotional. Although I got lucky with an incredible story. I never knew about Waris," she says. "The funny thing is, I met her briefly at a party with my husband years before."

Playing someone else, Kebede admits, is a uniquely strange experience. "Waris came on the set towards the end of filming and it was awkward meeting her at first. I felt like I'd gone through her life in intimate detail and you don't know how to behave." She recently travelled back to Djibouti, where much of the film was shot, to host a screening in the village. "That was amazing to reach out to people and show them something."

Lunch over, she tells me about her recent travels to the music festival in Timbuktu. "I loved the simplicity of the desert and listening to music all night long. It's something you must do in your lifetime. We're travelling with the kids around France, Italy and Spain for the rest of the summer," she adds, tilting her head dreamily towards the light. "It's something I wanted to do for a long time."

Outside, in the blinding sunshine, she promises to buy lunch next time I'm in town and disappears into the afternoon crowds, like a feather in the breeze. ♡

For information on the Liya Kebede Foundation, visit www.liyakebede.com. For Lemlem, check out www.matchesfashion.com or www.net-a-porter.com

JOBS FOR THE GIRLS:

above, Liya chats to some of the Addis Ababa women who work making her clothing line. She also campaigns on maternity issues, especially since becoming a mother herself to Suhul, nine, and Raee, five, pictured top left



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