

LILLY BEKELE: BUILDING A PAN-AFRICAN BRAND WHILE EXPANDING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

The Amina store in Loresho, Nairobi is the home of African craftsmanship. The store is lined with scarves, pouches, two-piece sets, baby rompers and tote bags, each carrying a story from artisan communities across Kenya, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire.

The warmth of the space is a fitting reflection of its founder. Lilly Bekele welcomes us with a smile before settling into conversation.

She reflects on the journey from a small experiment with textiles to an Ethiopian-born, Pan-African brand, and how a WhatsApp conversation with Amahoro Coalition grew into a partnership creating economic opportunities for displaced talent.



Lilly (right) with a customer at the Amina store in Loresho, Nairobi.



Customers admire fabric inside the Amina store

01

You spent years in development and communications. Did you ever imagine you'd end up in fashion?

A few years ago, I thought I'd spend my career in development. I worked across education, health, governance and gender before moving into senior communications roles at different development agencies.

But I always had a creative streak. I'd spend my free time designing and making things before I eventually started experimenting with textiles.

02

You trace Amina back to one trip to Senegal. What happened?

Three years ago, I travelled to Senegal and completely fell in love with the textiles of West Africa. I brought some back to Kenya and started experimenting with them alongside Gabi, a traditional hand-spun, handwoven cotton from Ethiopia and Eritrea.

I started a small textiles venture with Ethiopian partners. It lasted about a year, but by then I knew I wasn't done. Slowly, Amina grew out of that experimentation.

03

When I first heard the name "Amina" I wondered whether it came from your faith or from a person. Which is it?

It's a person. Amina Hassan was my great-grandmother.

She was forcibly displaced from the Somali region of Ethiopia before marrying my great-grandfather and settling in Harar. Without her, I wouldn't be here.

Naming the business after her was my way of remembering where I come from, while also honouring the many communities across the world whose stories look like hers. Through Amina, we hope to honour their legacies, their resilience and their pursuit of a dignified life.

Only after I'd settled on the name did my Kenyan friends tell me that Amina means amen in Kiswahili. It felt like such a confirmation as I am a person of faith.

04

Has her story shaped the kind of leader you've become?

In every way.

She's shaped how I raise my sons. I want them to grow up respecting women and leaving the world better than they found it. She's also shaped how I think about opportunity, especially for women, because we still live in a world that isn't fair or equitable.

05

You call Amina an Ethiopian brand with a Pan-African heart. Why was that important to you?

I wanted Amina to be a place where you could experience many parts of Africa under one roof.

Our primary textile is Gabi, a hand-spun, handwoven Ethiopian cotton that has been part of our culture for centuries. Today, we pair it with handwoven fabrics from places like Burkina Faso, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire.

We believe in the Ubuntu philosophy: I am because you are. That philosophy reminds me of leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Amílcar Cabral, Patrice Lumumba and Tom Mboya. They believed Africa's future depended on collective action, and that has shaped how I built this business.

06

Has building a Pan-African brand changed your relationship with Ethiopia and Africa ?

Absolutely. It's made me a student of the continent.

Every collection teaches me something new. Every product carries a tag explaining where the textile comes from, when that tradition began and the community behind it.

The other day, Njoki was sharing on our socials about the indigo fabric we use from Burkina Faso. She'd been researching the Mossi people, where the indigo pattern originates. It reminded me that every textile carries generations of history and tradition.

A display of hand-crafted fashion items at the store



07

You mention honour and fairness a lot. What do they mean to you?

The two are inseparable for me.

It starts with making sure the people we work with can build a life through their work. That means paying a just, liveable wage to our staff, charging fair prices and making sure our partners are fairly compensated.

Mutual respect matters just as much. I'm a guest in Kenya, so I'm very conscious of honouring my host country through how I behave and interact with people.

08

When you're interviewing someone for a role at Amina, what stands out to you?

Curiosity.

If someone is genuinely excited to learn about Africa, its people, its traditions and its craftsmanship, that stands out immediately. They don't have to know everything. But curiosity is what catches my attention.





Amina partnership with Amahoro Coalition

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What else makes someone an Amina person?

Of course, we want people who are excellent at what they do. We also want people with integrity who are kind and considerate of others.

Joyfulness matters too, although it can look different from person to person. Some people are energetic, while others are quieter or more reserved.

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How did your partnership with Amahoro Coalition come about?

It happened by chance.

Ahead of World Refugee Month, I saw a message in a WhatsApp group looking for businesses willing to donate a portion of sales to Amahoro Coalition's internship programme. I reached out and said, "I don't have a restaurant, but I have a small business. Is there a way we could support?"

That conversation led to Amina After Dark, our after-hours shopping experience, where we donated 10% of every sale that evening to support Amahoro's internship programme. My own journey across Ethiopia, the United States and Kenya has shaped how I think about belonging and opportunity, and the partnership felt like a natural extension of that.

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How did that partnership turn into hiring?

As we kept talking, I also learned that Amahoro had a pool of tailoring talent and asked whether we'd be interested in hiring some of them. I said, "Absolutely." It was exactly the right time because we were looking to grow our team.

We interviewed three candidates and soon after hired two, including Abigail. They've been a huge addition to our team.

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What surprised you most after the two hires joined Amina?

Amahoro Coalition works with people from across the region, so the people we hired were not originally from Kenya. Had we not worked with Amahoro, I don't know that we would have found these wonderful new additions to our team.

It also felt deeply personal. Amina herself needed someone to help her find a new home in circumstances she didn't choose.

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What's been the most memorable part of working in a more inclusive team?

It's strengthened the team in ways we didn't expect. They've been a huge addition to our team. Different perspectives, cultures and experiences have become part of how we work together, reinforcing our commitment to building a deliberately Pan-African brand.

On a lighter note, one of my favourite things has been watching two of our team members practise French together. Their rule is that whenever they see each other, they only speak French. Some days it's a quick "Salut, ça va?" before they're both back to English. Those little moments have made the team a lot of fun.

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If you were speaking to a business leader who's curious about hiring displaced talent but hasn't taken the first step, what would you tell them?

Start small.

If you can offer a full-time role, that's wonderful. If you can't, start with a part-time role or an internship. It still creates an opportunity for someone to gain experience and grow.

Sometimes people think they have to wait until they're bigger in size and revenue. But that can take years, even decades. Start with what you have.



The Amina and Amahoro Coalition Team during the Amina After Dark experience

If you are a forward-looking business interested in partnering with Amahoro Coalition to create jobs and economic opportunities for displaced people and host communities across Africa, we invite you to connect with us.

Reach out at info@amahorocoalition.com or visit <https://amahorocoalition.com/> to start the conversation.

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