

100 Years of Beauty: Ethiopia

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Figure 1 Empress Taitu Bitul leading soldiers into the Battle of Adwa (1896)

Ethiopia is an exciting and appropriate choice for Cut Video's first East African video. Its role in the African continent has always been interwoven with a deep history of rich culture, evolving traditions, powerful resistance, and diverse beauty.

In a country with 99.4 million people coming from regions with varied beauty trends across regions, villages, and ethnic groups, it is impossible to ever fully represent the diversity of beauty in Ethiopia. However, it is necessary to try and tell such a story when the modern story of Ethiopia's international public image sits at extremes between stories of famine, poverty, and war and the beauty of the "*East African girl*" in hip hop.

Beauty through the decades can't be reduced to just these two stories: one, a familiar trope of hopelessness in Africa, the other, a familiar trope of hypersexuality of black African women. And, paradoxically, it can't be pinpointed to one look per decade.

This project aims to show these paradoxes by showing how women's beauty trends have reflected responses to history. It aims to show the role of women in the Ethiopian story as they've gracefully carried Ethiopia through history as empresses with brilliant military tactical

strategy, as pilots, as fierce singers, Olympian runners, supermodels and superwomen trying to raise awareness around social and economic issues on the international stage. Ethiopian women have crafted definitions of beauty woven into the unity of the national flag and strength of Ethiopian national identity and East African international identities.

1910s



Look:

Source: <http://www.tadias.com/02/28/2013/the-1896-battle-of-adwa-empress-taitu-bitul-the-visionary-co-leader/>

Empress Taitu Bitul at Battle of Adwa

In 1896, most African countries lacked the resources to fight colonial powers when European powers were engaged in political and economic battles for resources, land, and power during what came to be referred to as the “Scramble for Africa.”

But at the Battle of Adwa, Ethiopia stunned the world and won an intense, decisive fight against Italy. This moment was about more than retaining sovereignty as an independent country and has been cited by some the fundamental basis of Ethiopia’s national unity throughout history.

Empress Itegue Taitu Bitul was a greatly admired woman in Ethiopia due to her role as one of the leading architects of military strategy for the Battle of Adwa. Never just the romantic partner to Emperor Menelik, as a well-educated women, which was rare for the time, Bitul founded the city of Addis Ababa, now the capital, as the location for the royal residence. This was seen as a powerful move to break the monopoly of power by Shoan nobility. Following the war, Bitul remained committed to trying to unify the diverse ethnic groups of Ethiopia.

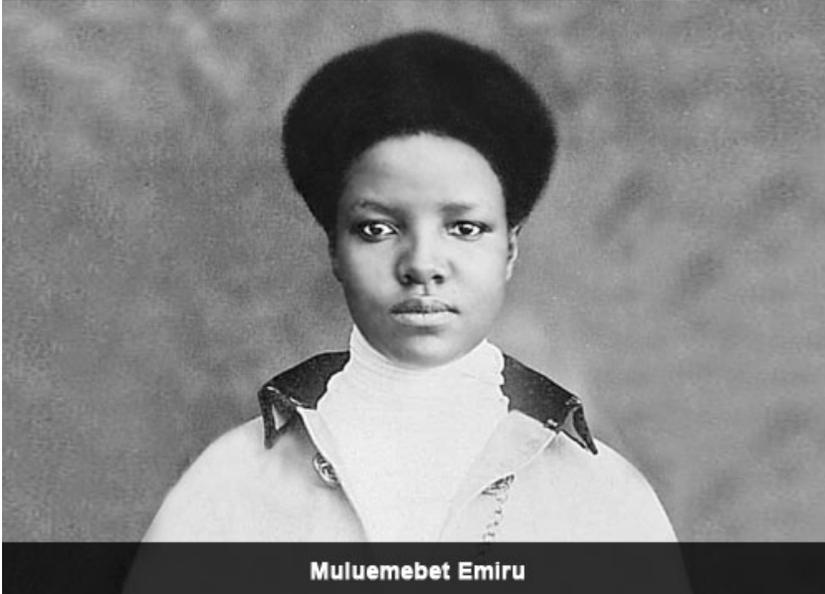
Influences of her style could be seen in the royal residence of Addis which is why she influenced the look for the 1910s era.

1920s



With the end of Emperor Menelik's hold on power in Ethiopia, the 1920s were the beginning of Ethiopia's long-lasting experience under Emperor Haile Selassie. Featured above is Empress Menen Asfaw, wife of Selassie. While less outspoken than the earlier Empress Bitul, she publicly campaigned for a range of social issues and was one of Selassie's most trusted advisor privately in an era that would soon see Ethiopia under Italian occupation.

1930s



Muluemebet Emiru



The Second Italo-Abyssinian war of 1935-1936 played out very differently than the first battle against Italians in Ethiopian memory. Unlike, the Battle of Adwa, Italy had much more sophisticated weaponry to use against Ethiopia and swiftly took control of Ethiopia. The second war brought in an era of Italian occupation of Ethiopia under the Fascist Benito Mussolini Italian regime from 1936-1941 and brought years of brutality into Ethiopia. The war also proved many inefficiencies in the then League of Nations of Taken in 1939 in Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) since the League was not able to stop Italian occupation of the country even with both countries being League members.

Most 1930s women, notably Ethiopia's first female pilot, Mulemebet Emiru, matched the style of the first three photos. However, Italian forces perpetuated images similar to the fourth photo featuring hypersexualized Ethiopian women.

The fourth photo was taken by an unknown Italian soldier during the Italian occupation that began in 1936. The photo later became the property of the British army following his capture and was used as their Christmas card in 1940.

1940s



(circa 1946)

With the Italian occupation of Ethiopia over in 1941 and later on, the Second World War, over in 1945, Ethiopia began a new chapter in its history trying to reassert national unity in an increasingly globalizing world. This photo dated around 1946 came around a time when Ethiopia also commenced operations of its new Ethiopian Airlines, a first for the East African country. The airline at first relied heavily on Western pilots however moved through the 40s and 50s increasingly trying to integrate Ethiopians into its staff.

1950s



Asnaketch Worku was one of the most popular musicians between 1950s to 1960s. As trailblazer female musician at a time when it was discouraged for women to be on stage, she fiercely set an example for more possibilities for Ethiopian women.

1960s



As the first female pilot to fly alone, Weizero Asegdech Assefa is a testament to the contributions of women to Ethiopian identity. When she learned that there would be a new flying school within Ethiopian Airlines that was open to anyone who paid the required fee, she jumped at the opportunity to learn how to fly. Ethiopian Airlines began operations in 1946 shortly after the end of the Second World War with international flights beginning in 1951. Upon hearing about her accomplishments as a pilot, she was praised by Emperor Haile Selassie. In interviews, she advocated that girls have to have self-confidence and faith in their abilities.

1970s



While Ethiopian operations in Africa grew, there was a shortage of skilled Africans in the aviation sector. Realizing that a true African airline should be managed by Africans, Ethiopian Airlines started to train Ethiopian professionals to take complete management of the airline, with the first Ethiopian CEO coming to the helm in 1971. These women represent this effort as further examples of how the airline venture would continue to benefit the country's progress.

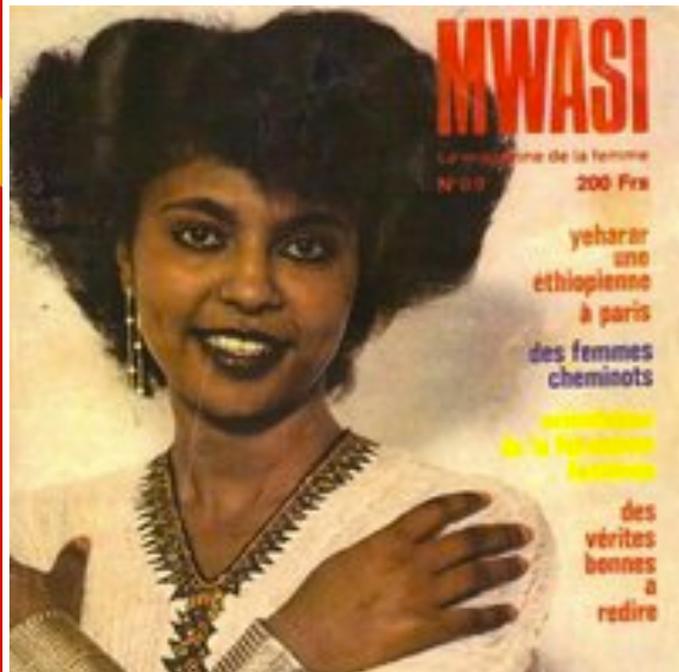
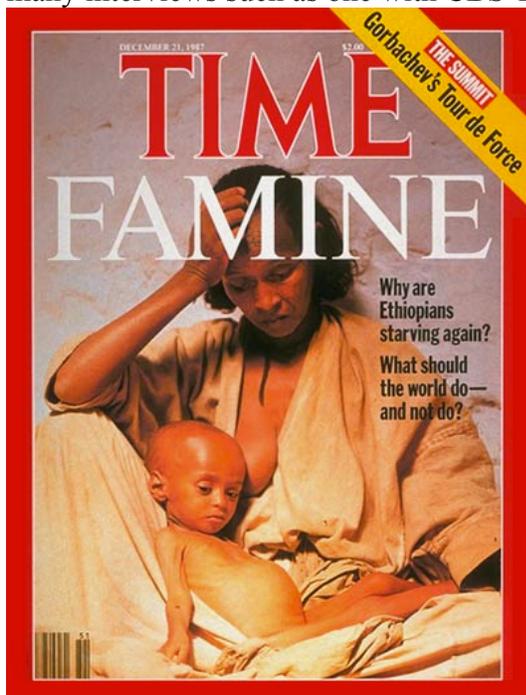
1980s



The 1984 famine of Ethiopia became one of the ways Ethiopia gained international media attention. With an estimated 1 million deaths, many of which in northern Ethiopia and modern-day Eritrea, the crisis clocked in as one of the first famines of the region in the century. Beyond the seriousness of drought, effects of the famine were exacerbated by Ethiopia's civil war against Tigrayan and Eritrean insurgents.

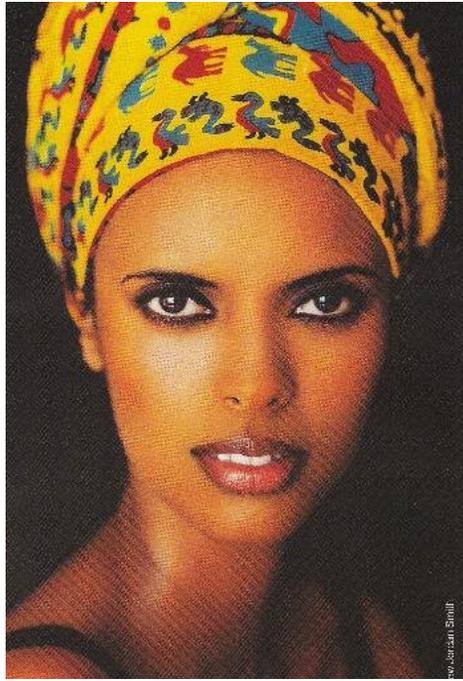
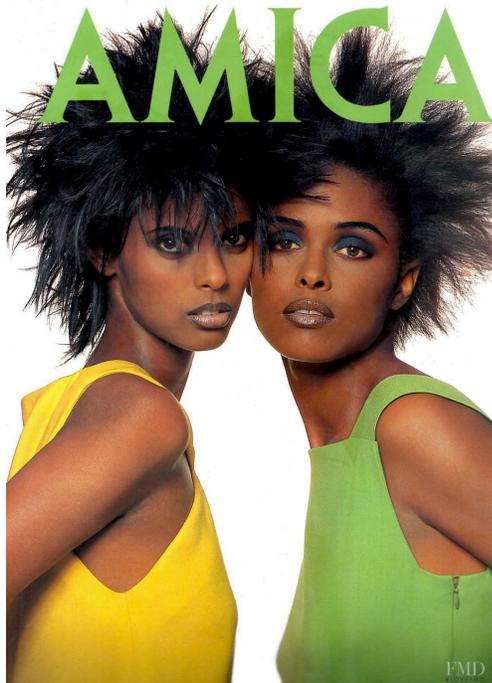
Inspired by BBC's Michael Buerk's reporting, Irish singer Bob Geldof "organised musicians to form the group Band Aid and record the "Do they know it's Christmas?" single followed by USA for Africa's single "We are the World." In July 1985, Geldof organised the Live Aid fundraising concerts, which were watched by more than 400 million people worldwide."¹

Along the way, Ethiopia's international profile came to be associated with the images of extreme poverty splashed across most international news outlets, encapsulated in the well-known Time Magazine cover. Even with such a disastrous catastrophe at the forefront of the international community, such images weren't the only images circulating in the 1980s with Ethiopians on the cover. Yeharerwerk Gashaw strut through runways of fashion capitals around the world to become the first Ethiopian international model. She used her status and role as an activist to bring light to a range of human rights issues, founding a political party, and working to change the global media portrayal of Ethiopians that the world associated with the country saying in many interviews such as one with CBS TV, "Ethiopians are not beggars, but heroes."



1990s:

¹ Source: <http://www.one.org/us/policy/ethiopian-famine-25th-anniversary-questions-and-answers/>



The 90s were a time of Ethiopian beauty increasingly making its way into international consciousness. With Ethiopian international model Anna Getaneh gaining attention from the likes of international fashion designers and songs like The Pharcydes “Passin Me By” and The Roots “You Got Me (feat. Erykah Badu) rapping about the *“Dopest Ethiopian”* and “peeping the Ethiopian queen from Philly takin' classes abroad...” Ethiopian beauty was being promoted in mainstream culture as one of the archetypes of mainstream beauty, particularly among black women.

2000s



As Estee Lauder's first black supermodel representing Estee Lauder, Liya Kebede, one of the most internationally known Ethiopians today, marked the beginning of a new era in fashion and beauty. Similar to many women described in this project, she remains committed to advocating for women, girls, human rights, and environmental causes most notably in 2005 as the World Health Organization's Goodwill Ambassador for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health. She went on to found the Liya Kebede Foundation to reduce maternal, newborn and child mortality in Ethiopia and around the world.



Kebede's look, or the look of Ethiopia's representative for Miss Universe Ethiopia 2006, Dina Fekadu, (left) represent one of the pivotal moments (began in late 90s) of the trend towards straightening hair and continued the trend of wearing lipstick and slightly more makeup that began in the 50s. Ironically, the look on the track for the world-class Olympic Ethiopian female athletes includes cornrows such as Ethiopian Olympic runner Tirunesh Dibaba in 2007 during Ethiopia's first female Olympic win.

This look had once been seen as the style of pre-1940s and could be attributed to Italian influences during the Italo-Abyssinian war, World War II, and Ethiopia's increased exposure to western beauty trends.

2010s





With Drake's hook about the *East African Girl* in Kendrick Lamar's 2013 hit song, "Poetic Justice," the look of Ethiopian women many attribute to the present day is one of bone straight hair or, increasingly, well-defined soft curls with usually fair skin. From testimonies of Ethiopian diaspora in Seattle, such the popular Ethiopian Fashion Blogger, Ribicca Mamuye (pictured in third photo), there has been a general decline and disdain towards wearing afros or cornrows particularly in formal settings. Mamuye also pointed out the increasingly tighter fits of habesha kemis sold today in Ethiopian markets, particularly in the last 10 years. In terms of beauty trends, the influence of music and introduction of Ethiopian women in hip hop culture certainly influence the look of many young Ethiopian women today. And yet, once again, this isn't fully representative of the diverse looks of many Ethiopians outside of the capital city, Addis Ababa.