

The Thinking Watermill Society | February 2024

Interview with Betselot Zewge

(Founder and Creative Director of Zemenay)



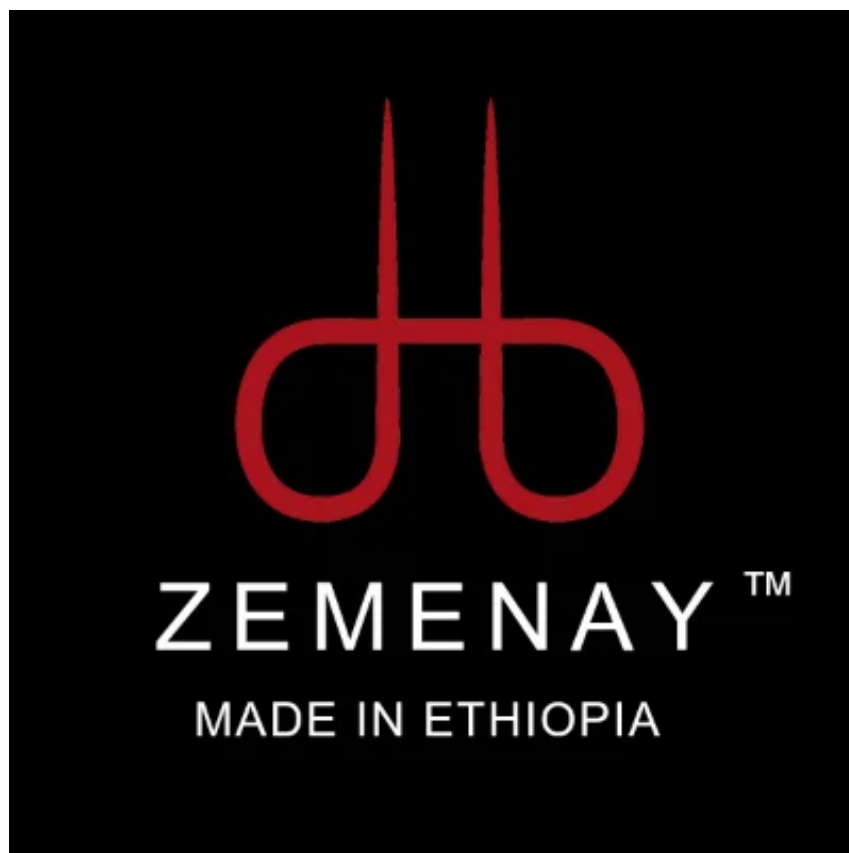
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Introduction

ZEMENAY is Ethiopia's first plus-size fashion brand founded by **Betselot Zewge** to inspire and change the status quo while embracing local culture.

In this interview with The Thinking Watermill Society, we delve deeper into Zemenay's sustainability practices, gracing the pages of Vogue magazine and the challenges encountered on the path to greatness. This is a great follow-up on Betselot's journey since our last conversation 3 years ago during our first video interview.



1. What is one word that best describes your brand Zemenay and what it stands for?

Zemenay is a trailblazer.

We are not just making clothes — We are shaking things up in the industry by being the first to embrace size inclusivity in Ethiopia.

We are more than just a brand — We are storytellers using our platform to ***inspire and challenge the status quo.***

And to top it all off, we are committed to sustainability, proving that innovation and responsibility can go hand-in-hand.





2. How does Zemenay incorporate Ethiopian culture, traditions, and craftsmanship into its sustainable fashion designs, and how does this contribute to the brand's identity?

Zemenay incorporates Ethiopian culture and traditions through storytelling, in addition to celebrating and supporting the well-known hand-weaving artistry of Ethiopia.

Our fabrics are sourced in Ethiopia. We breathe new life into ancient Ethiopian textiles and techniques, transforming them into storytelling garments that celebrate Ethiopia's rich heritage. We use handwoven textiles in order to support local artisans around us and support the local industry.

Our commitment to ethical sourcing and eco-friendly production reflects a deep respect for nature, aligning with both Ethiopian traditions and conscious consumer values. This unique blend of cultural authenticity, social impact, and environmental responsibility shapes our brand identity and helps us grow sustainably while empowering local artisans and preserving cherished traditions.



3. How does Zemenay integrate sustainable practices into its design and production processes, and what key principles guide your approach to sustainability?

At Zemenay, size inclusivity is just the beginning.

We're passionate about protecting our planet and empowering people, which is why sustainability is woven into the very fabric of our brand.

We reduce our environmental impact. We believe in slow production, crafting garments in smaller batches to minimize waste and ensure fair treatment for our workers.

We also partner with responsible vendors who share our values, ensuring ethical practices throughout our supply chain.

Ultimately, we want to offer beautiful, long-lasting pieces that are kind to the planet and empower all to make sustainable choices, all without sacrificing style or inclusivity.



4. Could you share insights into Zemenay's approach to promoting inclusivity and diversity through its plus-size fashion designs and the importance of this representation in the Ethiopian fashion industry?

Do you know the feeling of walking into a store and seeing nothing that truly fits or flatters your curves?

Yes, that used to be me too.

That's why I started this brand.

We believe fashion should be for **everyone**, no matter your size. We don't just offer "plus-size" clothes as an afterthought. We design with all bodies in mind, from the very beginning.

Our clothes are stylish, comfortable, and made to flatter every figure. We want you to feel confident and beautiful in your own skin, no matter what the size tag says. It's important because representation matters.

When you see a reflection of yourself in the fashion brands around you, it sends a powerful message:

"YOU BELONG"

It's about breaking down barriers and celebrating the beauty of diversity.

Zemenay is on a mission to change the conversation and make fashion truly inclusive for everyone.

5. How have its runway presentations and features influenced the Zemenay fashion brand's journey in publications such as Vogue Italia and Vogue USA, and what impact has this recognition had on the brand's mission and values?

Seeing diverse bodies strutting down runways and gracing the pages of Vogue Italia and Vogue USA is a major win for Zemenay. It's a powerful validation of our mission to celebrate all shapes and sizes.

This recognition isn't just about us — it's about shifting the entire fashion landscape towards size inclusivity. It gives us a bigger platform to amplify our message and inspire others to embrace the beauty of diversity.

Ultimately, this exposure fuels our commitment to creating clothing that empowers everyone to feel confident and beautiful, regardless of size.

Other than that, the recognition has helped us network with new people and tap into a new market.



6. What role do local artisans and craftsmen play in the creation of Zemenay's sustainable fashion pieces, and how does the brand support and preserve traditional Ethiopian textile techniques?

At Zemenay, sustainability extends far beyond materials. We deeply cherish Ethiopian heritage and empower local artisans, who are the backbone of this industry. Their skilled hands weave ancient stories into every piece, using traditional techniques like handloom weaving and intricate craftsmanship.

We collaborate closely with these artisans, by preserving their cultural knowledge for generations to come. By supporting their livelihoods, we not only create unique and sustainable fashion, but also revitalize age-old traditions and celebrate the rich cultural tapestry of Ethiopia.



7. What are the biggest challenges and innovative solutions Zemenay has encountered in promoting sustainable and plus-size fashion in Ethiopia, and how has the brand overcome these obstacles?

As the founder of Zemenay, I can provide a firsthand testimony of the challenges we've faced in bringing size inclusivity to Ethiopia. It wasn't easy finding clothes that flatter plus-size body types, so we invested heavily in learning how to create perfect fits for everyone.

Sourcing sustainable materials was another hurdle, but we started sourcing from local social enterprises with local artisans and weavers who are sustainability advocates themselves — which is good for the environment and empowers our communities. To this day, sourcing is tough because of logistics since these artisans are mainly located in the rural areas and small towns of Ethiopia.

However, the biggest challenge was the lack of awareness about plus-size fashion and body shaming. Traditional beauty standards just do not include everyone. So, we used storytelling through our clothes and social media to showcase the confidence and beauty of diverse models. It's been an uphill battle, but we're changing the conversation about size-inclusive fashion in Ethiopia by being innovative, collaborative, and staying true to our values.

We're paving the way for a future where everyone feels seen, valued, and empowered to express themselves through their clothing, no matter their size or background.

8. How does Zemenay positively impact local communities and the Ethiopian fashion industry through its commitment to sustainability and inclusivity?

Zemenay's dedication to sustainability and inclusivity creates a positive effect. We empower local artisans, preserving their cultural heritage through collaboration.

By championing size inclusivity, we challenge traditional beauty standards and inspire the fashion industry to embrace diversity. This sparks a chain reaction, fostering a more inclusive and confident society where everyone feels valued and empowered to express themselves through fashion.




9. What efforts has Zemenay made to educate consumers about the importance of sustainable and inclusive fashion, and to encourage more responsible and diverse fashion choices within the Ethiopian market?

At Zemenay, we believe fashion can be a powerful tool for positive change. We go beyond clothes — We educate our customers on the environmental and social impact of fashion choices. We do this through transparent practices, sharing information about our sustainable practices and ethical production.

We also collaborate with different fashion influencers to spark conversations and normalize inclusivity in fashion.





10. What is the long-term vision for the Zemenay fashion brand in terms of sustainable and plus-size fashion, and how does the brand plan to further influence and shape the Ethiopian fashion landscape?

Our biggest goal is to put African fashion on the map while celebrating different body types. Zemenay will become one of the reasons for a transformed Ethiopian fashion landscape.

We aim to be the go-to brand for all body types, offering diverse and stylish clothing that celebrates individuality. We want to set the bar high for eco-friendly and ethical fashion by pioneering sustainable practices and empowering local artisans. We hope to advocate for industry-wide change, inspiring others to embrace inclusivity and sustainability. Through consumer education, we aim to foster a generation of conscious individuals who make powerful choices with their clothing.

Zemenay's vision goes beyond fashion; we aim to be a beacon of positive change, shaping a future where Ethiopian fashion represents sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural pride.

Thank you for your cooperation on behalf of The Thinking Watermill Society. All the best in your current and future endeavours, Betselot.

Learn More about Zemenay

VISIT ZEMENAY





About The Thinking Watermill Society

The Thinking Watermill Society is a non-profit organization. In particular, it promotes the debate and exchange of ideas among its members regarding the changes underway in the economic, cultural and social landscape, together with the analysis of the consequences that said changes entail, so as to identify the possible opportunities of economic, cultural and social growth related to said changes.

Our headquarters are in Rome, Italy.

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"Ideas are what make us human. Ideas do not get handed to us by elites, the rich or the powerful. Ideas are not bounded by colour, race, gender or religion."