

OUT OF AFRICA

With her new shea butter-based beauty line, social entrepreneur Leila Janah hopes to nurture both skin and economic opportunity.

As humans, we all have needs—for dignity, beauty, love, work, meaning, and peace. Joy comes if and when we happen to achieve several of these things at once. Sparking that alchemy is Leila Janah's calling.

"I'm right on Lake Victoria," Janah tells me when I reach her in Uganda, one of the outposts of her nonprofit Sama, which is dedicated to bringing work to some of the planet's most impoverished people. The San Francisco-based tech entrepreneur already runs both Samasource, which offers employment in data services here, in Kenya, India, and Haiti for companies like Google and eBay, and Samaschool, which provides digital job training. But on this particular visit, Janah is tending to her new project: a beauty line called LXMI.

Pronounced "lux-me" and named after the Hindu goddess of beauty and prosperity, the brand's Pure Nilotica Melt—100 percent organic cold-pressed shea butter—and Crème du Nil, a lighter cream, will launch at Sephora this fall. Each features a rare strain of African shea that Janah discovered at a market in the northern town of Gulu, with a 25 percent higher concentration of healthy fatty acids than typical crops. Once she learned that *this* is how Ugandan women maintain such gorgeous skin despite the sun-parched environment, she decided to use the raw material to make luxury products with a unique sense of place—a terroir, just like wine.

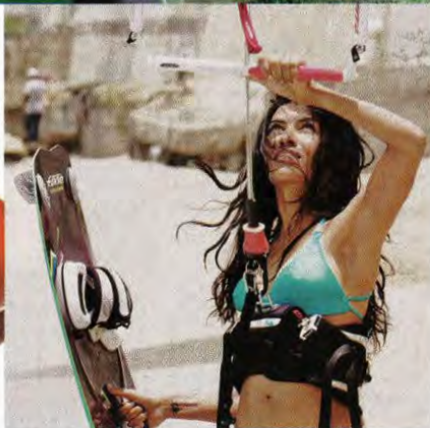
"Uganda is a really pristine environment," Janah says, a side effect of so much conflict and very little development. In addition to the nilotica, she has sourced local Ndali vanilla, a potent antioxidant, and a Nile-grown hibiscus that's "resurfacing and plumping." Her goal with LXMI is much the same as that for Sama: to bring self-respecting work to women through sustainable harvesting and thereby improve their quality of life. "Aid is not the only model. It's paternalistic, top-down," Janah explains, adding that paying people the bare minimum to make cheap products can cause problems as well. With LXMI's high-end positioning, she offers partnership and a dignified living wage that translates to economic freedom. This makes her products' appeal more than just physical.

The 33-year-old is exceedingly passionate about what she does, which means she is constantly traversing the globe for tech conferences and fund-raising efforts. But the nonstop pace is just fine by Janah, who derives energy from meaningful work (and who kite-surfs to unwind). That her mission happens to line up with an increased demand for cosmetics that are pampering and effective, while also empowering, is a happy bonus. —ELIZABETH WEIL BEAUTY > 586



LOCATION SCOUTING

ABOVE: LEILA JANAH IN CAPE TOWN, EN ROUTE TO UGANDA, WHERE HER NONPROFIT WORK SPARKED A SKIN-CARE BRAND. BELOW: AFRICAN SHEA NUTS, THE PRODUCTS' KEY INGREDIENT.



POWER PLAYERS

LEFT: LOCALLY SOURCED NDALI VANILLA LENDS AN ANTIOXIDANT BOOST TO LXMI'S CRÈME DU NIL (BELOW). ABOVE: JANAH, ON A KITE-SURFING EXPEDITION.

