

# Multicultural Marketplace

Each of these Canadian brands draws upon its founder's heritage to create meaningful products

BY SHERI RADFORD

## 1. CHEEKBONE BEAUTY

After struggling with alcoholism for years, Jenn Harper finally got sober in 2014. A few months later, the Niagara, Ontario, resident had a life-changing dream about Indigenous girls covered with lip gloss. "I woke up that night, and I grabbed my laptop and just started writing," she recalls.

What she wrote eventually became the business plan for a beauty brand focused on charitable endeavours to help Indigenous people. "The idea of success within Indigenous communities is never about what people attain for themselves, but about what they're giving back to community," she says.

Harper honoured her Anishinaabe roots by basing Cheekbone Beauty on the seven grandfather teachings, which form the foundation of an Indigenous way of life: humility, bravery, honesty, wisdom, truth, respect, love. And because Indigenous people are what Harper calls "the OGs of sustainability," the brand's lipsticks, eyeshadows, bronzers and more all have environmentally friendly ingredients and come in reusable, biodegradable packaging. Harper calls it "the Indigenous way, which means being really transparent about how we create everything." [Cheekbonebeauty.com](http://Cheekbonebeauty.com)

## 2. TAFUI

"Running around in the grass with no shoes on" in a yard full of trees bearing pomegranates, bananas and coconuts—that's how Tafui describes her childhood in Jamaica. "There was this automatic love for nature," says the artist, who goes by one name. Her affinity for the environment continued when she moved to Ottawa, near Gatineau Park: "It gave me a new appreciation for trees and air quality and seeing how close we really are to the life source."

Tafui now lives in Vancouver, and her paintings continue to explore nature and the interconnectedness of all people. "As a Jamaican, we have a motto, 'Out of many, one people,'" she says. "How can we come together even though we might differ on so many other things? How can we come to a common ground and move together in a positive way?" Her eponymous brand turns her bold paintings into prints, pillows and pouches, for people who "love art but don't necessarily have \$2,000 to spend on a piece." [Shoptafui.com](http://Shoptafui.com)

## 3. ONQUATA

Lara Sioui has more business sense, while her mother, Lise, is more artistic. This makes the duo perfect business partners—most of the time, anyway. "We don't have a filter," Sioui says with a laugh.

The two draw upon matriarchal traditions in their Wendat heritage to craft gorgeous hand-painted paddles in Wendake, an Indigenous territory in Quebec. Sioui says, "It's special for us and for everybody because it helps the community." With their timeless feel, the wooden paddles fit seamlessly into any modern décor. The company name, Onquata, is Sioui's first name in Wendat. She explains, "It means, 'comes from winter,' because I was born in December."

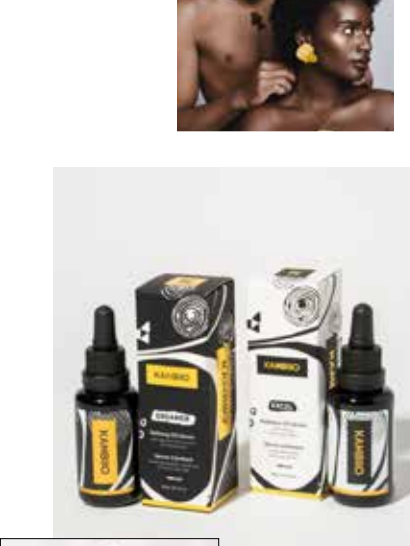
In the future, the mother-daughter pair hopes to expand beyond paddles and sell moccasins, earrings and more. Plus, they plan to open a store and a workshop where others in their community can pursue their art. [Onquata.com](http://Onquata.com)

## 4. ISRAELLA KOBLA

Born and raised in England, Emefa Kuadey lived in Ghana for a couple of years as a teen before moving to Canada to study engineering at university. But after starting work as an engineer, she found herself watching the clock all too often. So she moved to Toronto and enrolled in fashion school.

Now her brand, Israella Kobla (the name combines her middle name with her late brother's middle name), creates luxurious, timeless, made-to-order garments. "I really focus on the quality and the longevity of both the designs and the actual pieces," she says. "I'm still engineering—it's just a different outlet."

Kuadey realizes that most people equate African fashion with bright prints, but there's actually "a lot of diversity in the brands that come from African roots." Her goal is nothing short of revolutionary. "I want to change the perception people have of products that are made in Ghana or made in Africa," she says. "The reaction that people have to 'made in Italy' or 'made in France,' I want you to have that same kind of visceral response to 'made in Ghana.'" [Israellakobla.com](http://Israellakobla.com)



## 5. KALI WORKS

Neither Alex Dingiria nor Lindy Mokgweetsi has a background in fashion design, but that didn't stop the couple from launching what has become Canada's premier pan-African boutique brand.

"Kali Works started as a response to our experiences as African and Black immigrants in Vancouver," says Dingiria. He hails from Kenya, while Mokgweetsi is from Botswana. "We were missing some of those aesthetics or clothing items that speak to us in a realer sense. And as you may know, it can be hard to find that kind of thing in Vancouver."

At first they brought over items from markets in Africa, then began commissioning pieces, and now design their own tees, sweaters, jackets and more in their new-ish home of Montreal. Dingiria says Kali is "a Swahili word that means something that's hot, something that's spicy, something that's cool," and Works is a nod to the collaborative effort that's key to how the company operates. [Kaliworks.com](http://Kaliworks.com)

## 6. KAMBIIO

Born in Nigeria, Maryann Okoro moved to Ireland when her mother was working there, and later moved to Canada for her husband's job. Okoro struggled to find work in Saskatoon in her field of pharmaceutical science and drug quality assurance. After taking a few skincare courses, she started contemplating launching her own skincare brand.

Using African ingredients simply made sense to her, because of both the connection to her roots and the efficacy of the ingredients. "Africa is blessed with a lot of nature's wonders. And you see that a lot of these ingredients have been used for generations and generations," she says.

For her company name Okoro chose Kambio, which comes from the word Kambiri in her Nigerian dialect. She explains that it means "to come alive"—especially apt considering Kambio's skincare products focus on radiance and vitality. [Kambio.com](http://Kambio.com)

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