

Africa: An advertising voyage of discovery

 By [Vanita 'Bezi Phiri](#)

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After a year of my boss convincing me that real opportunities are in the rest of Africa, I decided to follow him and take up an art director post in Kenya. Like an insane explorer, I resigned at a reputable agency end of last year. After all, economists have been ranting about the swift progress in East and West Africa, and some known South African agencies are expanding out in search of opportune land.

So I placed my furniture and car in storage, hoping I'd be one of the early adapters - an African visionary trying to spread good advertising to a people that needs it.

The background: The Kenyan advertising story

I won't go into the details of Kenya itself despite its immeasurable natural beauty, a few good surprises, and some expected challenges - not to mention the recent Westgate Mall tragedy. But work-wise I'm learning a big lesson: It's not a group of companies that can change the advertising of a country. Advertising agencies such as Ogilvy, Leo Burnett, and Y&R are already represented here but they have not yet gained the industry esteem that comes with their names elsewhere. To transform an advertising industry takes massive change, investments from creative organisations, and it takes years of exposure, of setting up good creative schools, empowering locals and, above all, educating clients to want more.

The agencies that are most prominent in Kenya are mostly design agencies capitalising on the lack of well-established and competitive advertising firms. And by Kenya, I'm learning that it is a problem prevalent in all East Africa (Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia) and most of Africa.

Many times selling ideas to clients involves schooling them first: Not just with insight on their brands, but also on what we've assessed to be their true needs. Half of the time they think a rebrand will solve all their problems. But what we are also learning, and are grateful for, is that more and more clients are getting exposed. What they really need are agencies that care beyond delivering the expected 'deliverables'.

The challenge: Creative infrastructure

One of the challenges for me is being part of a team that has a different world experience; being told that "Kenyans don't think like that". But in general, our agency's day-to-day challenges are proving to be general industry shortcomings. When I first realised this, I began to question why East African advertising is generally poor or why South African or affiliated agencies win all international advertising awards that go to Africa. And one soon learns that it isn't as simple as "there's no creativity in East Africa".

So in the end I started asking myself, what does a South African consumer of a certain class want that a Kenyan consumer of the same class doesn't want? Of course, there are obvious cultural and lifestyle differences that may or may not translate into different needs. Yet it seems that it is lack of solid creative infrastructure that differentiates the Kenyan advertising industry. In addition, half the good work goes to South African agencies anyway so the Kenyan creative graduate doesn't always have as much of an advantage in learning through exposure and experience.

The real discovery: The art of selling on the black market

I'm not trying to sell the idea that we all should park our bags and land in Nairobi or Kigali to educate and spread the creative word while holding brand bibles. No. Personally, I'm tired of the world saying Kenya isn't this or that. I am tired of the slow progress we are making in advancing our industry across Africa. But mostly, I'm tired because the East or West

African problem is in fact, though not obvious or acknowledged, a South African problem too.

We are very lucky to work within societies that are rich in cultural diversity and with unique stories. South Africa has come a long way and advanced in advertising. Now vernacular radio ads are as engaging as English ads. But still, of the brands making noticeable news in advertising, I'm not seeing the mass brands advancing as much - and by "mass brands" I mean essential everyday products such as the cooking oils, teas and soaps that cater for the South African bulk of the population (the black lower class). I'm not seeing these products engaging with the people or applying insight-driven approaches and solutions as much as they ought to. They have generally been choosing the route of expired insights and gimmicky approaches. And even more uninspiring (a mentality that spreads across Africa), brands strip the consumer of everything but "low prices" in the world that he exists.

That's why I really took this job: Because I think what we really need in Africa is not new agencies but creative investment and I wouldn't mind being part of the movement. I feel that Kenya, and Africa in general - inclusive of South Africa - has room for growth, room to sell "people's brands" via approaches that are based on real, fresh and, above all, localised insight and thought platforms; brands that resonate with the people; brands that speak to vibrant urbanites while bearing in mind the aliveness of various tribal cultures; brands that speak to a predominantly black market while encompassing the strong Arab presence that is Kenya; in short, brands that are willing to learn that there is a specialised art to selling on the black African market.

Africa rising

Kenya is transforming, growing economically and its people are becoming more and more aware and specific in their needs. Though not at the same pace, this applies to the rest of Africa. So for now, like Marlow in Heart of Darkness, I'm going to end the year with high spirits and hope that one day, Kenya will stand as a Creative Republic and show the world that there's more to East Africa than the known stereotypes of head wraps and rustic images; that Kenyans (and the rest of Africans) are growing more and more hungry for creative transformation. And if the world is ready, then "karibu"! - It means "welcome", by the way.

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