

The African narrative: For Africans, by Africans

 By [Yaw Dwomoh](#)

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"Until the lion learns to write, every story will glorify the hunter."



Image source: Gallo/Getty Images.

Iconic Ghanaian journalist for the BBC, Komla Dumor, quoted this African proverb in his 2012 TEDTalk titled, *Telling the African Story*. The highly esteemed Dumor has sadly since passed on, but his love for the African continent and the sentiment of his talk remains: There are spectacular African stories to be told, but they are best told by, well, Africans.

Historically, the narrative around Africa has often been filtered through a lens of famine, poverty and foreign aid. Since the #AfricaRising movement in the early 2000's there has been a slow move away from this victim-to-victor storytelling method of depicting the African people, and with good reason.

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The new African audience is more tech-savvy, globally connected and brand loyal than ever. In fact, a recent [report](#) by Prof. Landry Signé on Africa's Consumer Market Potential, showed that Africa currently ranks third among world regions in real growth terms despite the fact that household disposable income has remained stagnant in sub-Saharan Africa.

Possibilities for South African businesses working in Africa

I, myself a Ghanaian born in Accra, has lived in South Africa since 1993 and though I call Mzansi home, I am passionate about the possibilities presented to South African businesses working in Africa.

My agency is known for its pioneering focus on the African narrative in their work with brands like McDonald's and Shell. Small agencies like this have a unique opportunity to provide a strategic value-add to brands looking to move into the rest of Africa, due to their lived knowledge of the African context.

I believe there is a space for brand storytellers to depict the ingenuity, innovation and heart of Africans in a way which does not ignore the socio-economic challenges. In fact, in a way that brings change on a socio-economic level. It is important that we do tell the whole story. That we highlight the lack in Alexandra Township, but that we also proudly show the high-rises in Sandton, just a few kilometres away. It is about balance.

Brands lose out on opportunities when they move into African countries with one desk and a token employee representing a "local branch" and they employ "copy-and-paste" marketing campaigns that don't translate well to the African context."

Brands operating in Africa need to understand the local culture they are moving into aside from just being able to speak the local language. For example, in 2017 a European skincare brand suffered severe backlash over a Facebook ad depicting a woman in a bathrobe, with the words "white is purity" written across her back.



Nivea ad "white is purity"

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It makes you wonder whether no one in their marketing team at any point stopped and said, “Hey, there may be a problem here”. You may find though, that these incidents happen because these same marketing teams sit in Europe and don’t have an African partner on the ground.

South Africa is in a unique position and carries an immense responsibility to treat the continent’s narrative with care. Seen as the springboard of businesses into the rest of Africa it is a melting pot of cultures from all over Africa.

African stories are not second-rate. They can stand their ground on the international stage. True, authentic African stories are best told from within the African context because they are such a deeply ingrained part of the culture.

African stories are:

1. About Africans, by Africans
2. Heartfelt
3. Character-driven (think of all the folk tales)
4. Provocatively challenge the status quo (in a good way)

They tell of Nana Akua Birmeh, the founder of Ghana’s first women-led architecture firm, ArchXenus, who won the 2018 Africa Women Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum Award in the Creative Industry category. Or of Cameroonian-born NJ Ayuk, the 38-year-old attorney who runs one of Africa’s most successful law conglomerates, featured in *Forbes Magazine*.

Bottom line

The opportunities in Africa are many and lucrative. Africans need to start telling their stories themselves. The businesses who are going to make a real and lasting impact are those who connect with the African consumer through their own “Africanness”. Those who know their ‘amagwinya’ from their ‘puff puff’.

ABOUT YAW DWOMOH

Born in Ghana, Yaw Dwomoh is the Managing Director of Idea Hive, a specialist Brand Storytelling company based in Johannesburg that enables medium-to-large brands to craft their brand stories in a way that is authentic, connecting with customers in a way that captures their hearts and their purchasing power.

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