

# NO MORE NEGATIVE IMAGES PLEASE

The time is right for African business – never before have things looked so promising on the continent. Anver Versi wants to see Africa blossom as it deserves to – and this means putting paid to damaging stereotypes





**We have to believe in what we have and what we are, not how others would want us to see ourselves.**

THEBE IKALAFENG

**O**ver the centuries Africa has suffered horrific abuse at the hands of foreigners - the dreadful slave trade, the terrible era of colonialism, the devastating proxy wars fought on African soil during the Cold War, the imposition of autocrats by foreign interests, the looting of its resources and human capital, the often deliberate derailing of its development plans - the list goes on and on. But all these catastrophes failed to break the African spirit. After each blow, Africa rose stronger and wiser, the famous African smile more resplendent.

Now as the continent stands poised on the brink of a new era of economic growth and political maturity, one more battle needs to be won. The continent is determined to

**BELOW:**  
Thebe Ikalafeng,  
CEO of South  
Africa's Brand  
Leadership

wrest control of its reputation from the foreign commentators who have traduced it for such a long time, to tell its own story.

It is no longer prepared to be demeaned and dehumanised by so many for so long. Africa has said that the role thrust on it of 'the whipping boy of the world, on whose head to heap all calumnies so that others may feel better about themselves or salve their guilty consciences' has come to an end.

"The false image of Africa as a continent of abject poverty and failure, in which nothing of any worth can be done unless it is done by outsiders, has been the dominant theme of the Western press for as far back as you can remember," says Thebe Ikalafeng, CEO of South Africa's Brand Leadership. "There are many conscious and unconscious reasons for this, going deep into history. But it is crumbling in the face of reality. The traditional gatekeepers, the editors and journalists, who decided what you could or could not see about the continent, are being retired by the Internet."

Perceptions, as study after study have shown, are more powerful than reality, and images determine our perceptions. Repeat an image again and again and it becomes the reality.

When it comes to Africa, says Nigeria's award-winning novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "only a single story of Africa is told by the media - a story of failure, famine and conflict. Thousands of other stories, of success, of heroism, of love, of courage, of life, are filtered out." While these same stories form the staple of media coverage of their own societies and of other societies they approve of, they go completely missing when it comes to Africa.

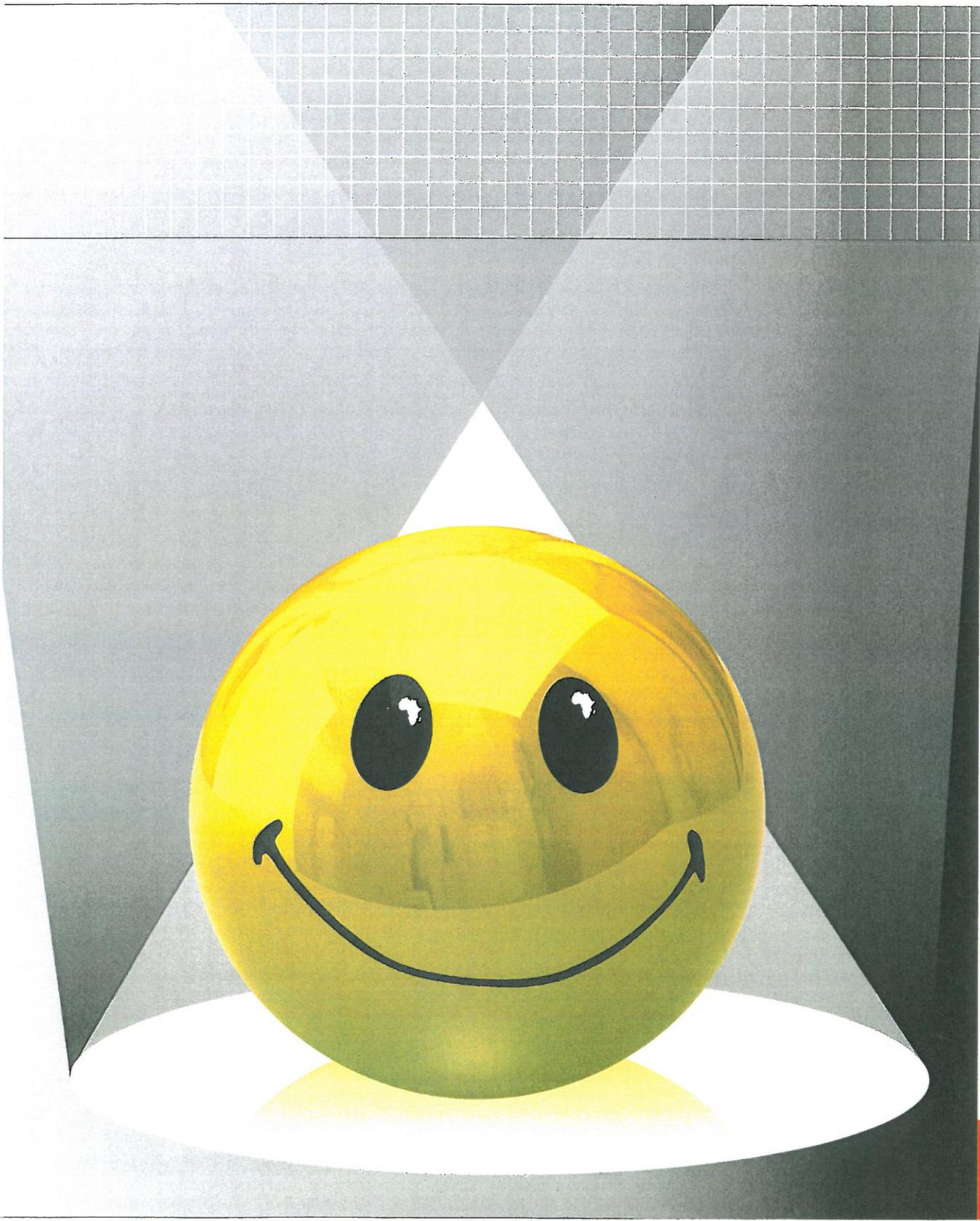
Cameron Doudu, a Ghanaian journalist, says that during his travels in Europe and America, he found that most people were fair when they were presented with all the facts or were allowed to see all aspects of an issue. But if the only images they ever saw of Africa were negative ones, who can blame them for coming to the conclusion that the continent was indeed a "basket case" (a favourite phrase of Western journalists) or at best a "charity case"?

**HISTORICAL BAGGAGE**

The question is: Why has Africa been singled out for such dismissive and often abusive journalism? Someone who should know, since he himself is a world-famous journalist, is the BBC's George Alagiah. Alagiah spent



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some of his childhood in Ghana, which he describes as “a place of great passion and variety. Above all, it is a place where the outsider is forever welcome. In the hardest of times and in the most desolate of places, I have been greeted with a warm hand and an open heart.”

Like many others who have had first hand experience of Africa, he found it impossible to reconcile what he knew about the continent with what was being projected in the British media. He set out to discover why and found the culprit to be what he termed ‘historical baggage’. He defined ‘historical baggage’ as “the 20th-century view of Africa infected with the prevailing wisdom of the 19th century”. The prevailing wisdom of the 19th century included this definition of the African by explorer John Hanning Speke: “As his father did, so does he. He works his wife, sells his children, enslaves all he can lay his hands upon, and unless fighting for the lands of others, contents himself with drinking, singing and dancing like a baboon, to drive dull care away.”

Speke had gone with another explorer, Richard Burton to ‘discover’ the source of the Nile. He was virtually blind and deaf by the time he reached

the shores of the lake he called Lake Victoria and was entirely dependent for all his needs on the same African bearers he was later to slander so cruelly in a speech. His attitude and the fact that he had broken his pact with Burton so incensed the latter that he never spoke to Speke again. Nevertheless, the image of the African as a “drunken savage” went down well at the time and, as Alagiah says: “It’s an ugly thought, but I would bet one of my new suits that there are many out there today for whom those words still have resonance.”

“For most people who get their view of the world from TV,” he wrote in an article for *The Guardian* newspaper, “Africa is a faraway place where good people go hungry, bad people run government and chaos and anarchy are the norm. My job is to give a fuller picture. I have a gnawing regret that, as a foreign correspondent, I have done Africa a disservice, too often showing the continent at its worst and too rarely showing it in full flower.”

Alagiah quotes a beautiful line from Ben Okri’s poem *An African Elegy*:

*We are the miracle that God made  
To taste the bitter fruit of time  
We are precious  
And one day our suffering  
Will turn into the wonders of the earth.*

The BBC journalist says that while the poem’s sentiment is a noble one, “it is not one you will easily glean from the reporting of Africa. There has been too much of Africans as victims and not enough showing their daily triumphs against impossible odds.”

He also writes that when he visited Albania he was shocked to see “there was somewhere as poor as Albania in this continent (Europe). But what I found more surprising, and disturbing, was the lack of *joie de vivre* in Albania, whereas even in the most poverty-stricken and politically oppressed corner of Africa, there is an irrepressible vein of hope and humour that bubbles to the surface.”

**SHOCKING LACK OF KNOWLEDGE**

Journalists like George Alagiah, who understand Africa and want to tell more than a ‘single story’ are rare, and editors who are prepared to go off the beaten track and allow such stories to be broadcast are rarer still. Stories that don’t fit the ‘African template’ are discarded and since, in the opinion of most Western editors, ‘African’ and ‘success’ are incompatible, success stories are immediately spiked.

I experienced this at first hand during my time in the English



The biggest challenge is to create a unified vision from all our disparate countries and promote Africa collectively. Individually, we don't count for much; united, we are a major force. Divided, we are easy to rule – directly or indirectly; united, we rule.

the rise of the middle classes, its world-class professionals and its spirit of inventiveness are still largely ignored.

**IMPACT ON BUSINESS**

The biggest issue with this incessantly negative portrayal of Africa is that billions of dollars of investment that should have flowed into Africa as a natural part of the investment cycle, do not.

Rwanda's President Paul Kagame, addressing the International Press Institute, said: "One of the reasons Africa is unable to attract enough foreign direct investment, which we need for our development, is the constant negative reporting."

The managers of Africa-based investment funds, many of them based in the West, have been tearing out their hair in frustration for years. The CEO of one of the largest funds told me: "We have been losing opportunity after opportunity to invest in prime projects because our shareholders cannot shake off the negative images of Africa imprinted in their minds."

He said that multinationals and investment companies did not bother to read 'the usual nonsense' in the Western media

**RIGHTS: John Battersby, UK country manager for the International Marketing Council of South Africa**



CREDIT

but relied on their people on the ground to provide them with information. "The problem is that while we see the situation as it really is and cannot wait to invest and get involved, some of our shareholders are still influenced by what they may have seen on TV or read in the papers. So we dither - and others, with no such baggage, come in and snap up the opportunities. We are being pushed out of the market by our own myopic media. I would happily strangle some of these all-knowing journalists who are merrily costing us, and eventually our countries, billions in lost opportunities."

"It has taken a long time but eventually the penny has dropped," says John Battersby,

the UK country manager for the International Marketing Council of South Africa. "The media has finally woken up to the fact that the old stereotype of Africa is not helping but hindering. Africa's image, in quality papers such as the *Financial Times*, has changed radically over the past 18 months. The mainstream UK press, unfortunately, is still behind the curve."

Battersby attributes the changing attitudes to the fact that Africa has seriously entered the investment space. He says: "For major companies, a foothold in Africa is no longer a 'maybe', it is a must. Africa is where China was 30 years ago and those who missed out then are still on the fringes." In

Africa's spectacular economic growth, its political maturity, its ability to solve its own problems, the rise of the middle classes, its world-class professionals and its spirit of inventiveness are still largely ignored.



CAMBRIDGE JONES/GETTY IMAGES



**LEFT: BBC Journalist George Alagiah understands Africa and wants to give a more balanced picture of the continent**

media and correspondents based in Africa quickly learn that the only way they can get their stories published is by looking for 'bad news'. Most foreign journalists I met during my days working for the media in Kenya knew shockingly little about the continent or the people, neither could they speak any local languages (mandatory for foreign correspondents in most other postings). Virtually all were convinced, without any evidence, that African leaders were corrupt, tyrannical and power-hungry, and those who succeeded in business did so only through bribery and corruption.

This was considered such an article of faith that correspondents routinely started

their stories using phrases such as 'oppressive regime' to describe the government, 'corruption riddled' to describe the economy and 'poverty-stricken' to describe the country no matter what the real situation on the ground was. Few of them bothered to actually go around among the people or discuss critical issues with well educated and analytical Africans who could provide a nuanced view. Their excuse, when you confronted them, was: "Look, London (or Washington or Paris) don't like nuances - they want it black and white. Good guys and bad guys. If you can't tell who is who, don't file (send in your story). The only good story in Africa is a bad one."

John Pilger, one of the most independent voices in the Western

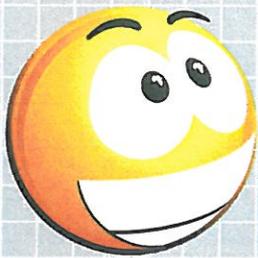
media, encapsulates the attitude perfectly. With savage irony, he writes: "We (Western journalists) need to understand the historic task to which we are assigned - that is, to report the rest of humanity in terms of their usefulness, or otherwise, to us."

Even when the 'usefulness' of Africa (in terms of the natural resources without which industrialised nations cannot survive) is beyond question, the coverage is confined to the activities of multinational companies - as if the space in which they operate is a vacuum, devoid of local people and their aspirations.

More recently, business coverage has focused on the 'threat' of Chinese, Indian, Brazilian, Russian and Iranian investments in Africa. They are being accused of being neo-colonialist and not concerned about human rights or democracy. This always raises hoots of derision in Africa where people will quote you chapter and verse to show some of the heaviest Western investments into the continent went to some of the most repressive and undemocratic regimes in Africa during the Cold War.

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## 7 of the world's top ten fastest growing economies are in Africa.

addition, Battersby says, Africa is the last investment frontier. "The US and Europe have peaked and have their own massive problems; Asia is chock full; only Africa offers opportunities."

Battersby believes that the negative reporting of Africa is the result of "knee-jerk selection of news based on stereotypes" coupled with lazy reporting. "Instead of looking at the new changes on the continent, it is an attempt to interpret the new in terms of an outdated paradigm." The new media, including Facebook, the Internet and the proliferation of media outlets owned and managed by Africans, tell a different story. "The Western press has lost its dominance on news coverage and is in danger or becoming irrelevant." He points to perhaps one of the most startling U-turns in the media stance. In 2000 *The Economist* published a cover story labelling Africa 'The Hopeless Continent'. Last year, it made a 180-degree turn and published a lead story entitled 'The Hopeful Continent'.

Battersby adds that the runaway success of the 2010 Soccer World Cup also went a long way to giving the lie to the negative images in the foreign media. "This event was a huge step forward for Africa's image. Africa as a whole got a large

spin-off from the success of the World Cup."

Changes on the continent itself are helping to alter perceptions. Today the majority of African countries are functioning democracies and seven of the world's top ten fastest growing economies are in Africa. The new media have undercut the influence of the traditional gatekeepers and people can now find out facts for themselves directly or access specialised publications like *African Business* to get a true picture of what is going on in the continent.

Traditional investors from Europe and the US, he says, have been shell-shocked by the speed with which emerging market economies like China and India are overtaking them in Africa. "There is a lot of rethinking going on among businesses," says Battersby, but the mainstream media are showing a delayed reaction "... because attitudes take a long time to change."

Indeed, attitudes which have taken a long time, an age, to condense cannot melt away just by wishing for them to do so. But they will give way if they are consistently challenged and if, as is now clear, they have become not only irrelevant, but harmful to the very people who, perhaps unthinkingly, propagate them. No more negative images of Africa, please - for your own good.

## THE WAY AHEAD

Africa has not been proactive in combating the negative images of the continent until very recently, says Thebe Ikalafeng, CEO of one of Africa's most dynamic branding agencies, Brand Leadership, based in South Africa.

**"We have allowed others to monopolise our story to such an extent that we have come to see ourselves in those images. We have come to believe that indeed we are as powerless and backward as we are portrayed. This is sheer nonsense. We have to regain our confidence and tell our own story in our own words and images. We must stop looking for validation from outside."**

Ikalafeng criss-crosses the world, projecting a positive image of what he calls 'brand Africa'. His company is behind some of the best known brands in South Africa, including MTN, Transnet, City Press and several others. He says that while Africa is made up of 54 countries, **"We need to take a unified approach to 'brand' Africa, because what hurts one, hurts all."**





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India and China have more poor people than all of Africa combined, but what image do they project, he asks? "They project success, technology, growth, culture, wonderful scenery and entertainment. They have taken control of their own image."

Ikalafeng believes that people grow into the images they project of themselves - or those projected for them by others. "Say 'Incredible India' long enough and soon the Indians see themselves as incredible and behave accordingly."

The success of African companies and the way they project themselves is changing African perceptions of Africa. "African companies are building some of the most fantastic

brands in the world and you can see how this is transforming how people see themselves," he says.

Frances Williams, who is the editor of the UK-based Reconnect Africa website, which brings professional Africans in the diaspora and companies working on the continent together, says she too has noticed a big change in the attitude of people towards Africa over the recent past.

**BELOW:**  
Frances Williams,  
Editor of the  
Reconnect Africa  
website

"The old paternalistic attitude on the part of Europeans, is gone. The attitude towards African professionals working in the diaspora has also undergone a complete transformation," she says. "Not so very long ago, only Europeans were seen as good enough to run multinational companies in Africa. Today, some of the most sought-after global professionals happen to have African origins. Companies based in Africa are battling it out for their services because they not only get a top-flight professional, they also get someone who has cultural access to the wider community - now recognised as an indispensable part of business success overseas."

Fortunately for organisations like hers, says Williams, an increasing number of African professionals, many trained in the best educational institutions of the world, are keen to return home and participate in the new blossoming of Africa. @



**READ MORE**

Turn to page 86 to read our business column - in which Komla Dumor wants to see a rise in intra-African trade. Jane Borsby reports on the success of a Kenyan communications initiative on page 88 and if you turn back to page 22, you can find out about a Kenyan coffee entrepreneur who is determined to fight for success

