

Beyond Diamond dissing

By [Sizakele Marutlulle](#)

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First as a consumer, then as a black consumer, I have been apprised recently of growing commentary, seemingly the dominant discourse at liberal dinner parties, descriptive of a new sense of 'patriotism'; a 'nationhood' that is supposedly arising, informing and informed by imagery currently presented through the mass media and which is ostensibly descriptive of a discernable new trend amongst our populace.



In recent times we have had the benefit of a plethora of commercials, the political correctness of which is predicated upon the 'inversion', as it were, of the racial paradigm of the "bad old days". Here madam serves lemonade to the maid who, with sardonic smile playing upon her lips, lies languidly upon her deck chair soaking up the summer.

New sociological proposition

We are supposedly witnessing the birth of an exciting new sociological proposition, one that suggests that in depicting black people in advertisements playing roles historically occupied by whites, and correspondingly by shoe-horning whites into the pre '94 Bata shoes and takkies – that we are somehow reflecting or predicting a leveling of the playing field – the genesis of a truly South African spirit that collectivises all of our former and current experiences and has us all singing "Free at las... free at last" off the same hymn sheet.

At the risk of being branded a cynic by the marketers and other protagonists of this new angle in the industry, I beg to differ – dressing mutton as lamb does not a lamb stew make. Who are you talking to here? The exercise of inverting roles might score a momentary chuckle at an obvious distortion of the familiar but this does not tell black people that they have just had an equalising experience or that they have advanced as a people.

Parading an old stereotype to parody a very recognisable feature of both the old and the new South Africa seems rather sad and futile. If anything, it perpetuates the very stereotype that one would want to distance oneself from – this image of subservience that held black men and women in the clutches of poverty in their own country. These 'new-South African' adverts may be different, but the principle remains the same: 'Black person, render service'.

Premature

I think it would be premature of us, as a people and a marketing sector to hail the virtues of "a new South African spirit" when we have yet to celebrate the identity of the black person in her own right. Let's strive to arrive at a point where the idea of "black" ceases to be synonymous with lazy, untrustworthy, dropping standards, militant, etc, etc, because until we

do this, we are kidding ourselves thinking we can claim a new collective South African consciousness that binds us as one.

I dare say that it is in fact by celebrating diversity while harnessing our collective strengths that we will commence bridging the chasm and thereby charting a path towards a “South African-ness” that sees me first as a person of South Africa, and does not use my race to feed a reductionist and prejudiced tendency to treat me as ‘an other’.

These irreverent depictions of life as someone else thinks I might want to see it are not, in my view, reflective of a genuine aspiration of any black person whose company I keep. Nor is this imagery part of a healing process; it actually tends to be quite painful rather than encouraging or indicative of a unifying spirit of change blowing through our land.

Seek to de-colonise minds

Before we claim the birth of a new South African aesthetic in the field of communication, we might first seek to de-colonise our minds and let go of the too well-ventilated race-based humour of old and try to find one another as fellow travelers on the road to Nationhood.

It's not the depiction of my people in this genre that's bothersome...it's the fact that my people are still cast in the context of apartheid's grand design. I see the joke, but it's a little tired now, so forgive me for not laughing!

‘Nuff said!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With over 13 years in advertising, Sizakele Marutlulle is an accomplished brand strategist and business leader. She was deputy MD of HerdBuoys McCann-Erickson until 2004, followed by a detour into tourism as COO of SA Tourism. She has now returned to her first love – brands and images. As CEO and founder of Mbonchild Communications (www.mbonchild.co.za), she offers business innovation and brand solutions and also acts as industry liaison in the spaces of pitch design, new business acquisition and agency performance reviews. Sizakele is a budding filmmaker and closet poet. Email her at za@mbonchild.co.za.

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