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More Than We Can Chew: The Paradox of (Re)branding Africa

By Cheryl N. Klufio
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Today, a quick Google search for the phrase "brand Africa" (in quotation marks and in English only) yields no fewer than 85,600 results. There is even a Brand Africa Initiative—launched on the propitious winds of South Africa's successful hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup—and a Brand Africa Project that predates it. (The Project's leader owns the trademark "Brand Africa.") If you happen to search instead for "rebranding Africa," the 17,400 entries (compared with 89 for "rebranding Europe" and 16 for "rebranding Asia") will keep you browsing for days. Among the results are articles bearing that precise headline from the *New York Times* and other publications. While Google search results for given phrases are not always 100% relevant, it is clear that these particular catchphrases concerning Africa are rapidly gaining currency.

Being from Ghana (a country predicted to be "the [world's] fastest growing economy of 2011" by Economy Watch), my stomach turns at the ubiquitous references to poverty, famine, disease, war and corruption that have become synonymous with the name of Africa. (Doug de Villiers, CEO of Interbrand Sampson Africa, states in a white paper published on Brandchannel.com in 2007 that the political, cultural and economic perceptions of a territory affect the business and tourism that it attracts. He writes, "The fact that [survey] respondents regarded Africa as having the lowest political stability and economic potential (especially when compared to the highly volatile Middle East) is highly concerning.") Suffice it to say that I fully understand—and even once shared—the zeal of those who nobly seek to "(re)brand Africa." However, I fear that they are mistaken: the first reason being that the notion itself can be self-defeating; the second, that this would be a gargantuan undertaking; and the third, that it may not even be a desirable goal.

When Africans speak of "(re)branding Africa," we bolster the very conceptualization that we are trying to avoid: Africa as one vast land mass traversed by a homogenous people from desert to jungle, from famine-stricken village to war-stricken town, and so forth. In other words, we not only perpetuate the use of the monolithic language (and accompanying imagery) that we want to eliminate, but, by using it ourselves, we actually endorse and legitimize it; after all, it is coming from the horse's own mouth. Europeans do not often speak of "(re)branding Europe," and Asians seldom talk about "(re)branding Asia." Why, then, does the notion of "(re)branding Africa" figure so prominently in the efforts of African countries and their citizens to correct their images abroad? Maybe if we adjusted our own phraseology, fewer people would talk about their impending trips to "London and Africa" or "China and Africa," as though those entities were equivalent geographical units.

One attempt to debunk the pervasive myth of a monolithic Africa is the slogan, popularized in part by the Stanford (University) African Students Association, "Africa: It's a continent, not a country!" Sadly, the T-shirts emblazoned with these words that quickly made their way around and beyond the university's campus haven't stopped the occasional world leader, including an American president or two, from expressing their pleasure to be working with such a great

country as Africa; but, certainly, Africans referring to Africa as though it could be branded or rebranded as a single unit doesn't help, either.

Having said that, the meatier question is whether (re)branding Africa is even feasible. We are talking about the world's second largest and second most populous continent, with a population of more than 1,000 million (or 1 billion, according to the U.S. numeric system), 54 countries (with the recent addition of South Sudan) and a multitude of cultures within those. To further complicate matters, many African countries continue to struggle with the colonial legacy of arbitrarily imposed borders and of policies that pitted peoples of different ethnicities against one another as a means of ensuring their collective subjugation. The result: intranational cultural differences that are more numerous and pronounced than they ought to be.

The exciting and encouraging concept of nation branding is extremely challenging to execute, which makes the notion of *continent* branding a virtual oxymoron. This is another reason that the work of place branding in Africa ought to happen primarily on a national level. Several African countries have already made great strides in this area. Two of the better known examples are South Africa, with its catchy and compelling "Rainbow Nation" concept, which nation branding guru Wally Olins praised as well-handled in a recent interview with the *Business Standard*, and Kenya, whose Brand Kenya initiative is being spearheaded by Mary Kimonye. Countries now launching similar efforts include Ghana, which set up a Brand Ghana Office in 2009 and held its first "Brand Ghana National Identity Summit" in 2010. All have their work cut out for them, since, even at the national level, successful and sustainable internal and external branding efforts are not a foregone conclusion.

Due to my background in marketing, organizational/corporate communications and public and media relations, I am used to hearing and saying that "good branding is repetition, repetition and repetition." In nation branding, too, consistency is key and it is crucial to stay "on message." But how does a country achieve consistency when it has a multiplicity of actors (from the public and private sectors, and from civil society) contributing in a decentralized fashion to the national brand? What happens when what I call "the clash of the diplomacies" takes place; that is, when traditional, public, corporate, cultural and citizen diplomacies are disparate? Surely, such a scenario on a continental level would be intensely chaotic; collectively determining, cultivating and projecting a brand identity shared by the entire continent would verge on the impossible.

In light of all this, the more formidable issue to contemplate is the desirability of the valiant endeavor to brand or rebrand Africa. In seeking to (re)brand the continent as a whole, are we not hankering after something that could actually be harmful to individual African countries' economic, political and sociocultural health within a global context? Further, may this not run counter to the heralded ideals of pluralism? Or, might too much differentiation produce the adverse effect of cementing the sense of disunity that characterizes Africa in the minds of many? I cannot hope to adequately address these daunting questions here, but they are certainly food for thought.

Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan has said, "Africa's profitability is one of the best kept secrets in today's world economy." I believe that we can unveil Africa's juicy

secrets—economic and otherwise—by tending to the internal and external realities and images of its individual countries, even as we strive to foster and celebrate increased cooperation among them. To this end, it would serve us well to consider a well-known maxim of public relations: "Perception is reality." Nation branding pioneer Simon Anholt likens the international public's way of considering a country to that of a jury assessing a criminal case: "the public will tend to concentrate on the accused, the victim, and on their *presumed* characters" [emphasis mine] (*Place Branding*, 2006, vol. 2, 4). African nations have enough work to do to overcome the entrenched negative perceptions that plague them, whether or not those views accurately reflect reality. When it comes to (re)branding, why don't we focus on combating skewed perceptions and their underlying causes country by country (or even in terms of cultural and economic areas), instead of biting off more than we can chew? It may well produce a more powerful cumulative effect.

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