

The importance of rooting creativity in South African culture

By [Mpume Ngobese](#), issued by [Joe Public](#)

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To quote the great Nelson Mandela: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." Having worked in advertising for many years, I have been tracking ad spend year-on-year, and in 2018 the industry spent R40bn on advertising and by 2021 it reached R47bn. Almost all the briefs we receive are for work in English, with almost half of these asking for the English work to be translated into the various African languages.

In a country as diverse as South Africa, with 12 official languages, English is spoken by just 9.6% of the population consisting now of 60,971,807 people. This means that with most brand communication taking place in English, there are so many missed opportunities for them to gain more market share, attract more users or reach lapsed users. Herein lies the problem – you don't gain market share by speaking to people in a language that is foreign to them.

At the risk of being judged for my authenticity, I want to tell a story of my recent visit to a village near Escort in KZN, to stay with my in-laws. It was my first time in a traditional village, having grown up between the townships and suburbs of Newcastle and Durban in KZN. My lived experience in the village framed and deepened my understanding of how a community in a village goes about living their lives. It was beautiful to see and experience people of all ages, rich in culture and tradition, living in free-standing houses built on fertile land, growing their own food, sharing and consuming all the same brands us city folk consume daily. And there was not a stitch of English spoken in that village. Yes, theoretically I have always known this. But theory is far different from experience.



Language is a huge part of culture and it is what connects us to each other. If brands want to connect in the same deep way, they need to speak in the same language as their audience. Brand builders must understand who the person is they are selling to and stop assuming they are all the same and applying theoretical assumptions from their air-conditioned boardrooms in the city. Considering the many idioms Africans use when expressing themselves, it is almost impossible to accurately translate that into the various languages without losing the true meaning. It is a fact that English cannot deliver the same level of connection as one's mother tongue.

As a previous jury president of the [Pendoro Awards](#), who celebrate creative content in all its indigenous languages, I can see that the shift has begun, with more agencies and brands moving in this direction. There is a lot more original work being submitted that was conceptualised in that language, work that one knows could not have been translated work because it is so deeply insightful and linked to a particular culture. However, that work is mostly proactive work driven by agencies, and not necessarily work that is backed by considerable advertising spend.

At Joe Public we are committed to growing not only our people, but also our clients. If brands are supposed to be a part of the fabric of society, it is important that we help them connect with and evolve with society. A beautiful example is the SAB Izithakazelo Clan Cans campaign. The brand recognised that cultural westernisation of Africa has become extremely prevalent and pervasive, so much so that western civilisation has taken precedence over African values and culture, meaning we are losing sight of who we are, and forgetting our rich and proud heritage. And so, with the insight that most African cultures have praise poems dedicated to their clan names, these clan praises hold an immense sense of pride in lineage, celebrating the ancestry and heritage passed down from generation to generation. The can designs were inspired by a variety of traditional African patterns. The back of each can carried a uniquely South African clan praise which is dedicated to the clan's ideals, way of living, as well as imbuing the richness of their lineage and heritage. For a brand to

recognise the depth and importance of *izithakazelo*, *iziduko*, is truly remarkable.

Another is the delightful Sunlight soap bar 'Since Since' print ad done a few years ago that shows the various stages of the soap bar that hits home with Africans who use it for all sorts of reasons right until the very last bit is consumed. This piece of work resonated with me, as the delightful story that it told, is what makes South Africa, South Africa. It is beautiful insightful work like this, that embraces and appreciates its consumers in an authentic way.

A brand's personality is shaped by the personality of its nation and the sooner brands realise this and take the steps to making this an inclusive country where everyone and every culture is recognised and celebrated, brands will begin to see that marketing, when executed properly, is an investment that yields fruitful results.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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