

Africa in the streets



The Med-Lemon advert shows a man seeking help for flu from a traditional healer. The scene opens with bags of traditional medicine lined on the floor of the healer's home. "Makhosi," says the man. Makhosi is a greeting honouring traditional healers. The patient explains his symptoms to the healer. The healer goes into his kitchen (making sure no one sees him), pulls out Med-Lemon from behind a tin on the shelves. He adds hot water to it in a glass and pours the mixture into segong (a natural container made from hollow butternut-like plants). Back in the other room, he instructs the patient to "drink this now, you will sweat the fever and headache away". The advert closes by showing a long queue waiting outside the healer's home for this same remedy.



The Woods Great Peppermint cure advert opens with a young wife, dressed in a suit, buying traditional medicine for coughs from two hawker sangomas. The area seems informal, with bushes in the background. In the next scene she is cooking the medicine in her modern kitchen. The medicine – a brown, bubbly liquid, has overflowed on her stove causing an undesirable mess. As she holds the remedy on a spoon for her husband and two children standing in line, to drink, they refuse. Their facial expressions tell of their unhappiness about the medicine. Her grandmother walks in and asks what she is feeding them. She responds: "It's for the cough Gogo, you said to get a traditional cure." "Not that traditional cure," says the older woman, holding a bottle of Woods Great Peppermint Cure. Suddenly the family all want to be first in line to drink Woods. The closing scene shows the Western, ideal image of a nuclear family, laughing together on a couch in a modern living room – a "reality" that will never be, for many Africans in the face of extended family.



The AVBOB life cover policy advert opens with a scene depicting a busy township market, with hawkers, pedestrians and taxis in the background. Two small boys are playing among the crowd. They buy something from one of the hawkers. Suddenly they see a funeral procession and immediately go to watch as the priest, mourners, and choir walk past, with a few cars behind them. The voice-over relates how with AVBOB one can afford a decent funeral – coffin, busses, even catering. The boys proceed to the funeral home, peeping into a tent where some big mamas are cooking for the mourners. One of the women looks at the boys sympathetically, and dishes them a meal.

Natalia Molebatsi looks at how television advertisers use images of African cultural knowledge to sell products to an emerging African audience.

In our day, elders still influence many aspects of life – for instance in rites of passage such as motherhood, funerals and family gatherings. Traditional healers provide the "other eye" for society, they possess higher spiritual powers. As much as cultural activists keep an eye on the mass media to protect African knowledge against disrespect, there are loopholes – "little" things that are not a train smash, like when a traditional healer removes trust from his medicine to demonstrate the healing powers of Med-Lemon, and being dishonest to his patient. "At least black people's appearance in TV ads has increased," we say, without looking at content and context.

The complaint read: "The ad undermined African tradition, insinuating that African traditional healers are dishonest to patients, presented white medicine as superior and was discriminatory in that

it mocked African practices."

Ruling: Dismissed. Reason: "The scenario was a harmless parody and would be seen as such by the reasonable person. It cannot be said that it offended the sensibilities of consumers generally or was discriminatory." (www.dispatch.co.za/2004/07/30/Features/ads.html).

Viewers, similar to the media, fail to see the long-term effects of images created in our minds about tradition – those who complain about these "parodies" are seen as unrealistic. What happens to mindsets, if images degrading cultural practices are reproduced (over and over) through powerful mediums like TV? Perhaps, an even more detached audience will be maintained. Biko says that Africans who do not scrutinise, are not looking at life from within, and are therefore not conscious of their being.

The older woman and the traditional healer in these adverts are used as forces undermining "old ways" or "that" tradition. By saying "not that traditional cure," the older woman (in the Woods ad) degrades traditional medicine bought from the sangomas. When one consults with a traditional healer, it is the healer who communicates with spirits to inform the patient about their ailment, not the other way around. In the Med-Lemon advert, however, the patient explains his symptoms to the healer. This provides incorrect information about the traditional situation, further discrediting the methods of African healing.

Biko says that people who allow themselves to be degraded, are supporting that oppression – all actors used in these adverts are black people, with the images presented to a predominantly black audience.

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of advertising

When the older woman says “not *that* traditional cure!” culture is placed at two levels. She gives advice to the younger woman about which level to associate with. Knowledge is therefore associated with approval, and approval with power – these are associated with elders. Images where role models are used to lessen African culture remain degrading to anyone who believes in the effectiveness of tradition. “We can no longer afford to frown upon our ways, by trying to fit into other people’s perspectives,” says Biko.

Elders, death, and traditional healers are significant forces in the African cycle of life. They can however, be used to form incomplete and uninformed images, leading to misrepresentation and misconceptions about culture.

Smoother knowledge

In our everyday lives, Western and African medicine are used interchangeably. It is therefore disrespectful to uplift Western medicine at the expense of traditional remedies – there are many unexplored benefits of traditional medicine, but it doesn’t have advertising opportunities.

In these adverts, traditional and Western medicines are compared – with the Western getting the thumbs up. Through these images, traditional healers can also be stereotyped as liars – because some people do tend to have doubts about cures that are “unscientific”. Such images become particularly significant during certain health debates – whether or not HIV/AIDS patients will derive benefits from traditional methods.

Like Med-Lemon, Woods Peppermint Cure is packaged in a small bottle with a registered label, legitimising it. In the Med-Lemon advert, the scene opens with bags of traditional medicine on the floor before zooming in on the patient. These bags are silenced and defaced because they are not given any attention by the advert maker. The Western medication was smaller and quicker to make – just add water!

The young woman (in the Woods ad) portrays traditional medicine as difficult, messy, and leaving clean up work for her. The medicine looks like muddy water with bubbles – becoming undesirable to the family’s (and essentially to viewers’) senses.

Are we saying that tradition is out of control, while Western practices are more advanced, well packaged, easily

digested and smoother on our throats? Advertisements work on our senses – in these images tradition is given in slow, bitter ingredients packaged in sacks (in a world where everything is shrinking). These images are not only about depicting Western knowledge as desirable, but also about dishonouring and mocking African knowledge and spirituality.

Editing history and tradition’s significance

Through images, time can be edited. The AVBOB advert’s pay-off line is “*Keeping you at peace for over 80 years.*” The fact that AVBOB has been trying to capture the African population for about a decade, (they preferred white clients during the apartheid era) nullifies the line. The advert places children in a funeral scene, whereas in African cultural history, children are kept as far away as possible from funerals.

Africans regenerate by relying on and connecting with tradition. Reproducing themselves through respecting the dead is a form of rebuilding.

When I first saw the AVBOB advert, I was pissed off, as it is common knowledge in our communities that children don’t go to funerals, unless it is their next of kin’s. In our everyday lives, it’s more difficult to physically honour customs such as bowing your head down if a funeral procession passes next to you. These customs, however, are still related by elders – advice on the do’s and don’ts regarding tradition. The children in the AVBOB advert peep into the funeral tent and the woman gives them food, which displays an inaccuracy of traditional information and lack of research for the advert.

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Life’s contradictions

I had a conversation about these images with a traditional healer I met at an international science community gathering recently. Contradiction struck when we started talking about an African flow of life.

“I am a researcher at an institution where I have to give ‘scientific’ evidence to my knowledge. I am also a traditional healer entrenched in my spirituality, I am proud of my profession as a healer and trusted by my patients (her wrists and neck display various sangoma beads). I also dress in modern

ways,” she says about her everyday life

She is married to a white man and says that she lives a traditional and modern life because “it is required of us in our day, we are educated and participate in a global arena with Western influences”.

The traditional healing profession is not respected because it is portrayed as “business in the dark” – as in the Med-Lemon advert, the healer’s dim-lit home presents an informal, inferior and hidden healing space.

This conversation confirmed that many Africans (even traditionalists) live life holistically – weaving different and relevant experiences into our daily lives, without frowning on our cultural values.

In conclusion

Images portrayed by such adverts (judged as innocent parody) inform how advertising can influence mindsets and prejudice viewers.

These images continue to perpetuate stereotypes of black people as the savage – the traditional healer as dishonest, unformed, and followers instead of initiators of trends.

As much as depictions from some of these images are classified as positive by people who don’t condone traditional beliefs, they undermine viewers who identify with traditional practices.

These considerations raise important questions, such as: How critical is the average television viewer in 2005? Who creates (and packages) images that leave African culture incomplete and barbaric? Who approves TV images that seek to capture our minds? Are we passive, stimulated or ignorant image recipients? Can we invoke a transformation in how we view images – about black people – through social institutions like mass media? ■

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