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## IS AFRICA THAT FAR?

Whenever I start a discussion on Africa in Ukraine, in most of the cases I come across dogmas, myths and stereotypes. Deadly diseases like AIDS, Ebola, Malaria and pictures of extreme poverty come into the mind at first. Pathetic stories of drowning immigrants close to the European shores and pictures of malnourished children on television screens certainly do not add appetite to explore the region any closer. Moreover, the continent is too far from home territory and is quite unknown, still hidden behind dark mysterious legends.

For centuries, we have been fed by media, which has generally shown Africa in dark shades. From childhood, we are brought up by the stories where 'the good' fights 'the evil' and good always turns out to be the winner. If you observe carefully, you will see in popular cartoons we raise children with character traits, like "Lion King", "Bamby", "Nu pogodi", the evils and the villains are depicted in distinctive dark colors. In classic ballet "Swan Lake" we see evil Odile clad in a black attire among the "snow white good ones". The colour black is still waiting its turn to be glorified some day!

The recent history of Africa is marred with colonialism, apartheid, slavery, ethnic conflicts, genocides and the continent have had very few opportunities to be glorified in front of the world.

It does not mean, that the world did not know about Africa. Western Europe smelled the wealth of those regions and reached those borders centuries ago and eventually concurred and colonized them. They lived there, ruled there, looted them out of their wealth completely for more than a century. It won't be an overstatement to say that a major source of Europe's wealth is Africa.

When Africa came out of its colonial days, like in Asia, they not only found their wealth looted but also found that the overwhelming share of their population was kept far away from the light of basic education for generations.

Ukraine fortunately has no such colonial past across ocean and may be therefore not that well versed with people and culture of these places. It's quite natural that when you don't know somebody, you are apprehensive about them.

For some unknown reason, many in the world refer to the continent Africa as if it's a large country as a whole. It is amusing, just like the way most Americans refer to the vast Soviet Union as Russia. The continent of Africa contains fifty-four sovereign countries and the land of Africa can house whole of China,

India, contiguous US and much of Europe. People and cultures of Africans starting from Egypt to South Africa are as different and diverse as that of Siberia to Uzbekistan.

One beauty of Africa today is that the continent is extremely young. Around half of the population of 1.2 billion people is less than twenty-five years of age. These young populations empowered by internet and smart phones can do wonders.

You know, countries of the African continent are leaders in mobile banking today. In my last trip to the tiny nation of Malawi, I visited the picturesque lake Malawi. For a landlocked country, this beautiful lake with white sand beach is a major tourist attraction. My local driver Chikondi bought fish on the way back with all the money he had with him for his family. Then came a call from his sister. She came to know that brother was visiting the lake side on duty and wanted some fish too. It is very much like the practice in Ukraine; when we buy Bychky on the way from Odesa to Kyiv. Chikondi confessed he used all spare money to buy fish for his family and can only buy for her if she sends some. In no time came a signal on his mobile device. An intimation of money being transferred from his sister and Chikondi bought fish instantly on the roadside. Indian company Airtel has made a major investment in that region.

My job takes me to many countries in different continents. I have seen traffic jam in all the major capitals. Dar Es Salam is also notorious for its traffic jams, especially on their airport road. We got stuck at the jam. The hotel taxi driver said, it looked like we were to stay on the road for quite sometime and offered a service of connecting to Wi-Fi for an hour in his car. I paid close to a dollar and spent most productive time in a traffic jam.

You know Ghana to be a leader in testing “blockchain” for their land and property registration process. I am fortunate to have met the famous university professor whom the President has appointed as an advisor for this purpose.

Ukraine, being a bread basket, has a lot to offer to the developing countries of Africa in the field of food security. With rich experience and expertise Ukrainians can be of much help to the agricultural and food sectors in Africa, where in many cases they are at the early stages of introduction of modern cultivation, irrigation and storage. In addition to direct supplies of readymade food products like poultry, dairy, vegetable oil, Ukraine has a lot to offer to the nation building aspirations in Africa with their expertise in heavy engineering, mining equipment, infrastructure development, post-harvest grain handling, food processing and IT sectors.

During 11<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> May 2018 in the major event – Fifty-first Session of the Economic Commission for Africa and the Annual Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development – finance & planning ministers of fifty-four countries gathered under one roof in the UN headquarter Ad-

dis Ababa (<https://www.uneca.org/cfm2018>). There, once again I felt the diverse aspirations of different African countries and also their aspiration and desire to create a continental free zone for business.

For any business, that is willing to explore the opportunities in Africa, the first and most important step is to identify the areas of focus. Small countries can show good prospect, but individually offer small clientele. Therefore, considering the ground realities like logistical and financial aspects, one has to decide on an effective entry plan.

Africa is large and diverse, you can find there; the pristine beauty of Zanzibar (Tanzania), wildlife extravaganza of Maasaimara (Kenya), the remains of the oldest human Lusy in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and unknown pyramids of Sudan. Fresh Tilapia at the Source of Nile in Uganda or Nile Perch at the Junction of two Niles at Khartoum can meet the expectations of any demanding taste buds. No wonder 'Visit Rwanda' is the sponsor of the English football team Arsenal for the season 2018–2019.

We start the day with a sip of Arabica (a region in Ethiopia), relish the tests of Cacao from Ivory coast, greet the loved ones with Kenyan roses, engagement rings with diamonds from Congo and dance with rhythms of Africa – Africa somehow helps us celebrate our lives. So maybe it's high time to know Africa closer?