

LAP OF AFRICAN LUXURY

Swaady Martin-Leke

is an achiever. No better word can describe this former regional director at General Electric, who in less than a year of launching her luxury brand, Yswara, has achieved what takes many companies years to accomplish, if at all. In this heartwarming interview, she shares with *New African Woman's* **Belinda Otas**, her journey from a high-end corporate role to how, last year, she launched and developed the fast-growing Yswara, a company she describes as “a luxury brand that is truly African in origin, nature and tradition”.

NAW: You are trailblazer within the African luxury industry. What are the responsibilities that come with such an accolade?

Swaady Martin-Leke: We are very much at the beginning of our journey and I would say we are an aspiring luxury brand. It's a lot of work and responsibility, and trying to build something like this out of Africa is not easy because Africa still faces a number of infrastructural challenges. Building a company for all of us, not just entrepreneurs, in Africa is not for the faint-hearted, it requires a lot of energy. You need to be extremely determined, perseverant and be constantly optimistic so that you are not brought down by all the challenges that you are facing but are fighting to

overcome them and say, okay, if I can overcome them, the person coming behind me will not have to go through the same. So, when you talk about the responsibility that comes with being a trailblazer, that's the responsibility we have.

We are in the space where Africa is growing. How can women entrepreneurs tap into this growth and have a global reach?

I'm a strong believer in collaboration. For me, the number one thing is for us to collaborate, because that's how we are going to be stronger. The most instrumental people who have helped me since launching Yswara have been women. So for me, collaboration is very important. Equally important is hard work.



Essential ingredients:
Yswara combines
African authenticity
with luxury



When people think luxury, “Made In Africa” does not usually cross their minds, they look elsewhere for that fulfilment. How do you get people to believe in your vision and brand?

We are actually rebranding, tea was a pilot. I started with tea because there was an opportunity on the market globally, secondly, it's a product that I love. We are now rebranding to become a fully-fledged lifestyle luxury brand. As I speak, our first prototype of Yswara Jewellery has come out. We are also going to have a homeware range, which we already have but will develop and extend. As we develop and build Yswara, we continue to build it as a trailblazer of the luxury African lifestyle. As for what makes us unique and how we can keep a niche – first, it's the authenticity, it always has to go back to our roots. Who we are and what is the essence of us being African, and adding our new contemporary identity.

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The role of women in Africa is changing. How do you stay or become successful?

I am a strategist, my background is very much that. Hence, I'm very strategic about everything I do. I plan and base my decisions on data. It is good to have instinct but I believe in data. I always do my homework before trying anything. I took a lot of time before I even launched Yswara. I spent a year working on the concept and I have 150 pages of a business plan. I worked around the

clock just to make sure I understood the industry and my competition because once I started the business, I would have less time to think.

What are some of the challenges that women continue to face as entrepreneurs in Africa?

I think the main challenge for women to be quite honest is funding and I would say scaling up. Being an entrepreneur, I meet a lot of fellow entrepreneurs, such as Magatte Wade, an amazing woman who

has really been able to scale her company up. But if you look at the majority of African women entrepreneurs, very few have been able to climb up the ladder, and if so, they have only been able to after 10, 15 or even 20 years. I find the lead time for me in scaling up is much shorter. The question therefore is: how do we support women to get access to capital, so they can scale up their companies?

Do you think this is a gender issue or is it because society wrongly believes that men will be better at the job?

I think it's a combination of different factors. Us women, especially African women, are the backbone of our families, and I think in general, we take measured decisions and we are very careful risk assessors, unlike most of our men, who just make decisions without thinking of the consequences. The other is access to finance, as I mentioned earlier. Men still own the capital in Africa and so they are better able to invest in their friends' companies.

Has your gender ever been a source of limitation in your career?

No. I don't look at the glass as half empty or half full. I think there are challenges being a woman but there are also advantages. At least in a male dominated world, if you are a woman, there is an opportunity to stand out. Also we bring a different perspective to the world. It's tough being a woman, it's like having all these heavy crosses to carry, but at the same time, we have incredible strength, which is so powerful. I'm amazed by the strength of women, it's mind blowing. I think that's very unique, men don't have that kind of strength.

Why did you feel the need to bring the identity and cultural aspect of your African heritage into your brand and business?

Interesting you are asking this question because no one has ever asked me this. The truth is that Africa is such a young continent. While the majority of our population is young, we were not taught our own culture and history. There's no way we are going to build a bright African future if we don't know where we come from and if we are not proud of our roots. It's not only knowing your history as an Igbo person or knowing the story of your ethnic group, it's about being from Zimbabwe and knowing the history of Mali because it affects you as an African. If you look at Europeans, they have a very strong sense of self and a strong sense of where they come from. Yswara is very much about that, and how we are going to make everyone discover all those African gems.

When you say African essence, people think fashion, wrapping your hair in African head wraps, wearing jewellery that is made in Kenya, but is there more to African essence?

Absolutely. The essence of being African is a very strong consciousness of our history and heritage and it goes beyond visual crafts and ethnic symbols. It's the evolution of us as Africans. One thing, and why I'm a big fan of the new African concept, is that when people say African solutions for African problems, it's about modernity. Every civilisation and country goes from tradition to modernisation. Modernisation comes with a new set of values. The problem today for Africans is not that we are picking values from other places, because those values come with being a more modern society, it's how do we evolve into new Africans who are still very much conscious and aware of their past and have also developed a new contemporary identity? The new African is an African who is very much conscious and aware of where they come from but has evolved into something that is modern.

You recently launched in France. What was that like?

The reception has been overwhelmingly positive. We even received a prize from the French National Marketing Institute less than a month after launching. For us, it was amazing. I thought this is impossible because other brands that received prizes were brands like Wonder Bra, the French Post Office, really big companies, and here we are, an African company, small company that launched eight months ago in Africa and three weeks before the awards in France and we received that kind of recognition. These things motivate you. We haven't done the retail and that was a good way to test the market. We have also started discussions with some key buyers and hopefully that works and then after that, we will slowly but surely expand our retail footprint.

What is your message to young African women?

I would say believe in your dreams and work really hard to execute them. I would also say collaborate. And by collaboration I mean it could be mentors or it could be you mentoring or it could be a partnership. All of these help you to better develop your roadmap. ■