

BAIT & SWITCH

Novica.com serves up tribal African art to armchair travelers.

By ANN MARSH

FOR A WHILE, it looked as if we were going to miss our dinner in Accra, Ghana, with the editor of Novica.com.

Catherine Ryan, who goes by the title of "wander woman" for this Los Angeles-based multinational purveyor of ethnic artwork, was scheduled to fly from Accra to Harare, Zimbabwe, just as we pulled in from Lagos, Nigeria.

Despite long layovers and lost luggage, we managed to catch up with Ms. Ryan in the early evening at Katoka International Airport. Ms. Ryan was on one of her monthly visits to meet different Novica artists around the world. We had an overlap of about an hour. Where to eat?

"There is a nice place right across the street," said Kofi Kyeremeh, the manager of Novica's two-year-old Ghanaian operation, which dispatches 200 pieces of local artwork a week to online buyers around the world. Slightly jet-lagged, we were skeptical: "At the airport?"

Ah, but we had forgotten: this was coastal West Africa. Airport dining here bears no resemblance to the stale atmosphere at American or European airports. Outside the bus terminal-size airport,

the crowded Aerostar Restaurant, with its outdoor seating and palm trees, looked like a pleasantly rundown tropical burger stand. The menu offered both Chinese fare and local spicy *jollof* rice and *fufu*, the quintessential Ghanaian dish made by using tall tree trunks to pound yams into pasty submission. A Nigerian reggae beat pulsed over a loudspeaker, which also announced flights leaving for Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Ms. Ryan and Mr. Kyeremeh introduced us to three other Novica employees and two artists. The eight of us pushed a couple of tables together and poked foot-long straws into bottles of pineapple juice.

Typically, we ply our Bait and Switch dinner companions with booze, but we quickly learned that the Novica crew was high on another kind of spirit. In addition to running Novica's fast-growing operation, Mr. Kyeremeh told us he rises seven days a week at 3 a.m. for a two-hour morning ritual of singing and dancing at the charismatic Christian Manna Mission Church in Accra. "I work 12 hours straight," said the 29-year-old former accountant, his eyes shining.

"I get home at 10 p.m. By the time I get to bed it's 11 p.m. I'm used to staying up late and getting up early."

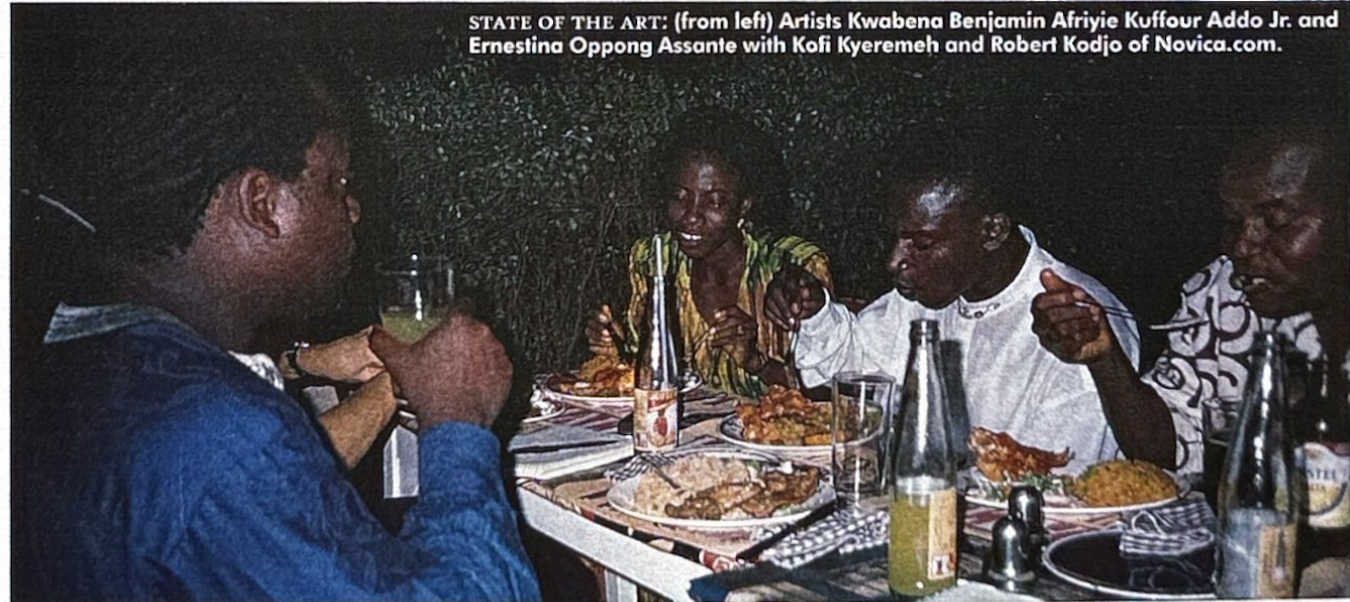
Like every Novica employee we met, Mr. Kyeremeh is fired by a sense of mission. An internal auditor in his last job, Mr. Kyeremeh signed on to the lowly task of packing boxes at Novica because it meant a chance to learn about the Web and help local artists. "I wanted to do something totally different," he told us. He shot up through the ranks and now runs the Ghanaian corner of this small but growing global company.

Here, as in 14 countries around the world, from Peru to Bali to Indonesia, Novica draws together networks of local artists, more than 1,000 in all, who post photographs of their artwork on the Novica site. A Peruvian-American Stanford University grad with a background in investment banking started the company, along with his Brazilian-born wife. The third cofounder is a former United Nations official with a specialty in global refugee work.

So far, the Ghanaian office has drawn together 60 artists, and Mr. Kyeremeh hopes to attract another 140 in the next year. Shoppers from all over the world, but mainly the United States, buy their original pieces online. The Novica centers pack the goods and ship them by DHL directly to the customers, eliminating several layers of middlemen.

The artists do not become Novica employees, but continue to sell through other channels. Mr. Kyeremeh and Ms. Ryan were eager to introduce us to some of the Ghanaian talent, who make more

STATE OF THE ART: (from left) Artists Kwabena Benjamin Afriyie Kuffour Addo Jr. and Ernestina Oppong Assante with Kofi Kyeremeh and Robert Kodjo of Novica.com.



money on the Web than they ever could make locally.

"How much?" we asked 32-year-old painter Kwabena Benjamin Afriyie Kuffour Addo Jr., who wears long dreadlocks, ankle beads, and a single pearl earring.

"In a month, without Novica, I sell about one painting for \$30. The first month with Novica, I sold ten paintings just like that—for \$100 to \$150 each. So you can imagine," he said, rolling his eyes. "It's like a miracle to me. Novica is like a fresh girlfriend you fall in love with." With the spike in income, Mr. Kuffour Addo moved out of his parents' home and into his own apartment. He also bought a cell phone and has started to eat out more. "You can see I've put on some weight," he says.

Two years ago, Ernestina Oppong Assante, 32, was running a small shop an hour and a half outside Accra in the small town of Aburi, where she sells her carved masks and talking drums. One day Mr. Kyeremeh passed her shop and asked Ms. Oppong Assante if he could post pho-

tographs of some of her pieces on the Web. She was skeptical.

"That week we said, 'Hey Ernestina, you have some sales!'" Mr. Kyeremeh recalled. "That was the first time she had faith."

"Now I'm supplying them with 20 drums a week," said Ms. Oppong Assante. To keep pace, she opened a second shop and hired five people. As master carver, she directs them to turn *sese* (white wood) and *tweneboa* (cedar) into *kpanlogo* and *djembe* drums.

Novica does tinker with the artistic process. The Los Angeles headquarters sends the artists catalogues from retailers like Pottery Barn to give them a sense of the colors and styles that are popular abroad. "Doesn't this undermine your claim of selling genuine native artwork?" we asked Ms. Ryan before dinner.

She shrugged and said, "It's simply a way for artists to improve their sales." Novica also insists that artists meet certain quality standards.

We wondered briefly whether Novica was having a sterilizing effect on its artists, but then the conversation turned to tribal culture, and we thought again. Colonialists brought Christianity to Ghana, Mr. Kyeremeh explained, but some 3,000 tribal chiefs still wield considerable influence. City dwellers go out of their way to attend regular festivals presided over by their chiefs. "If you show any disrespect, you are banished," Mr. Kyeremeh explained. "They can prevent you from burying your dead in your home town, which is a terrible disgrace."

"You can even be killed," says Edward Humedo, Novica's national representative for both Ghana and Nigeria.

Nothing sterile about that. Our dinner companions suddenly looked far more resistant to the effects of Pottery Barn westernization than we'd realized. We gulped the last of our pineapple juice and saw Ms. Ryan off to Zimbabwe. ☞

Write to ann.marsh@redherring.com.