

# Kukua; The diverse, inclusive and educational challenger to Disney

*Diversity in the imagery we see on screen or print is a very big deal. There is an importance in seeing all races represented in the media. Kukua is doing that with its' 'Super Sema' educational cartoon that follows the main protagonist; an African girl named Sema and her twin brother, MB.*

Temps de lecture : minute

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Sema's adventures and travels in the cartoon world help children to learn, whilst at the same time be entertained. The Disney model needs to be reinvented, children need role models that are not just white Barbie and Ken dolls, role models that allow girls to believe they can do anything. There needs to be diversity present and Kukua brings us exactly that.

Lucrezia (Lulu) and Vanessa are dealing with this image and identity battle both in front of and behind the scenes of the business. Their team is predominantly female and made up of players who are renowned for their work in the film industry, alongside those who are new and breaking through into it. Perhaps because of this, and because from the onset their business grew with good morals and values, they secured over £3M in seed funding.

No wonder that momentum is coming in thick and fast from not only future investors, but some of the largest media companies in the USA, who are ready to take the leap into diversity with open arms.

# [Maddyness] Lulu, tell us about Kukua and Super Sema?

[Lulu] By 2025, over 2 billion children are going to be born into the world, a world with technology at their fingertips. They will be the most diverse and globally minded generation so far and the skill set they need will be heavily focused on technology.

Kukua is the edutainment company built for them. We have leveraged the intersection of entertainment and technology, to create a magical learning experience centered around a universe of characters that reflect a high majority of the world's population.

'Super Sema' is our first character, she is an African 10 year old girl with the superpowers of creativity, determination and a heavy dose of STEAM skills. Together with her techy twin brother MB they "technovate" solutions to protect their village from an evil robot ruler. In doing so they learn educational skills, as well as being entertained. Kukua will branch out from the cartoon with apps to a longer upcoming animation series, toys, home activities and live experiences, we will create an entire world around Super Sema. A world that entertains and empowers children equally and at the same time.



Vanessa, tell me what your first impressions of Lulu were and why you thought her vision was so special?

[Vanessa] My first impression of Lulu was “wow, this woman is going to change the world!” Her eyes blazed with a passion for Kukua and the team, and her mind was wired with that unstoppable mentality. It seemed like there was nothing she couldn’t do (or learn to do!) I was instantly pulled in by her desire to make the world a better place, her love for Africa, and her fearlessness to go out of her comfort zone time and time again. I’m always attracted to people who don’t just “talk the talk”, but actually show you what they’re committed to and work to create the world they want to live in. Sema is a mirror image of her creator, determined, inventive and inspiring! Lulu’s bold vision for Kukua to become the Disney of learning based in Africa was what ultimately sealed the deal for me. Africa has always been my second home and being a mother of three gen Alpha black kids, I know the importance of

meaningful learning experiences that enhance their curiosity and STEAM skills powered by role models that look and sound like them. When my kids watch Sema and MB inventing in their lab, they feel a sense of belonging in STEM and that gives them the confidence to flourish.

**Lulu, you first met Vanessa on your African Retreat just after your first fund round. Why did you ask her to come join you out there before she had even joined the team? Can you describe her energy and vibe on the trip?**

[Lulu] November 2018 was an incredible month in the life of Kukua. We had just raised our first \$3M seed round from some of the top VC's in Africa and Europe (Echo VC Africa, [firstminute Capital](#) in London, Kima Ventures in France and Burda Media in Germany). Our Kenyan leadership team had come to spend 3 months in London just before we were all going to fly back to Nairobi together for our team retreat. All planned to be an incredible trip to celebrate our fund round, dream-storm the next 18 months of Kukua, (in the middle of Africa's inspiring savannah) and be joined by another 8 extraordinary women from our team, flying in from the US and Italy. Just when you think it can't get better than that, Vanessa Ford walked into our (at the time!) Founders Factory office on Young St in London. Her hair was visible before she was and as she walked towards me from a distance, I remember silently hoping she would be my 11 o'clock! What was setup to be a quick 30 minute intro ended up being a heart-to-heart story of our lives, which left me in complete awe of the grace, wealth and power of her experiences.

Kukua's female hires (Clara, Claudia, Magda, Sly, Lynne) all have in common one thing, they landed in Kukua like shooting stars; unexpected

but just at the right time. After only a few moments of being there, I felt as if they belonged. The same could be said for Vanessa, it was an immediate click. One thing I have learned over the years is that when these extraordinary human beings come into your life, you just don't hesitate to open the door and invite them in. A few weeks later we were on Sema's jeep in Africa, a month later we couldn't imagine Kukua without her and two months later she joined Kukua as COO.



Vanessa, you are a young mother of 3, whose career has spanned from studying infectious diseases at Oxford, to consulting for McKinsey, to The Weinstein Company before starting your own film production

## company. Now COO at Kukua, how do you juggle it all? Can women really have it all?

[Vanessa] For me, the concept of “having it all” means “sharing it all,” that both men and women pull their weight as equally as possible in a family, that women no longer feel ashamed for hiring help, getting help or asking for help. As an entrepreneur, I’ve learnt that my superpower is choice, that I can create my own opportunities, build my own squad and craft my own narrative. Thankfully, I have a supportive husband who believes in me and is proud that I am a role model to our children in terms of what a woman can achieve. I also like to expose my kids to my work so they understand why it’s so important to me. We go to Africa together, they’ve had roles in my films, they are Super Sema’s #1 fan. They know that when Mommy is running late for dinner, she’s working hard to make the world a better place. Equally the same applies the other way around with team Kukua, they welcome plenty of kid-bombing on zoom!

The truth is there is no secret to balancing a thriving career, a happy marriage, and three healthy, well-rounded kids, all while maintaining friendships, volunteering, and finding time for myself to go surf or read a book. Not at the same time, something always gives, it’s not always enough to simply “want to have it all” and “lean in” as Sheryl Sandberg says. I’ve accepted that. I think it’s now time we stop asking women the impossible questions and start figuring out solutions that allow us to create space for everything that’s important to us and to thrive in that space.

## Vanessa, why is it so important to have children globally see a cartoon that reflects



and represents them? How has seeing your children understand and interact with Sema helped to cement the fact that this is a brilliant idea and one that is long overdue?

[Vanessa] By 2050, 40% of children worldwide will be of African descent. Yet 74% of characters on TV remain white with only a few portraying black female leads in STEM. So it's not an overstatement when we say we've created a superhero for the biggest and most underrepresented audience in the world!

As a black Caribbean girl growing up in North America who majored in science, I didn't see characters that had my afro hair or acted like me on TV, I relied on my own superheroes, my mother and Oprah, to help me understand my self worth as a black girl. They were the ones that fundamentally changed and reaffirmed the way I saw myself in the world and gave me the capacity to dream beyond what I thought was possible.

Today, I want to know that when my three children and their friends turn on a device, read a book, or play with a toy, they can not only see themselves reflected, but also see characters and stories with the attributes of my own heroes and role models, curiosity, empathy and resilience. Now more than ever, Super Sema is the superhero the world needs and it just so happens that my kids are the first ones to test and oversee every bit of her world!



## Lulu, you chose to have a predominantly female team, was this a conscious decision?

[Lulu] I founded my first company very early at the age of 16 and growing up I was surrounded by extraordinary mentors, almost all of which were men! So, when I started Kukua, I was worried that I was never going to be able to attract any women! But, as I believe is the case with many female leaders, when it comes to hiring, it ends up being easier for us to hire women.

We empathize with them on a human level, see traits that men often undermine and naturally understand the inbuilt hustler ability and energy that these women have. Yes, even a mother of 3 working remotely! This is why it is so important to have women and women of colour at the top of the decision making tables, they are the ones that will give women more chances and as a consequence finally break the glass ceiling.

Although our team is for the majority female, we also have some



incredible men onboard. Men such as Vanessa's super husband, our male employees, investors and advisors who are constantly pushing our confidence up and challenging our ambitions. They remind us that there's nothing we can't achieve and to go for it. We are lucky to have them and these are the type of men that any team could hope for.

Can you pick 2 or 3 people that you have on your team that you are super proud of, or that you feel their own journey is somehow reflective of what you are trying to achieve with Sema?

[Lulu] There is no bigger achievement for me than seeing our team thriving. When the learning curve is exponential, mixed with risk-taking and hard work, the company is pushed forward every single day. It is only then you know you have the right people on your team.



Clara Muthoni, was our first employee and is now head of Super Sema's production and she is the personification of this. Young and with little experience, she rose quickly to the top leading our initial Sema Apps, creating, managing and testing over 20 literacy and math games. When it came to picking the head of production for the Super Sema's animated series, (a role responsible to lead a team of 40 people!)

It was Claudia Lloyd, Super Sema's writer and executive producer with 20 years of international experience and 4 BAFTAs in her pocket that said '*Clara should be the one*'.

With a perfect combination of humbleness that allows her to be a sponge and learn everything she can, partnered with her self-confidence reminding her that there's nothing impossible to crack. She is the shining star of this production and what is great is that now she is ready to pass on her experience to someone else. This is my biggest pride; to have created a culture that allows women to believe in other women and give them chances. Much like the chances I had when I was starting out.

[Vanessa] I am particularly proud of our superstar director Lynne Southerland who was Disney's first African-American female director (Mulan 2). She believed in us and came onboard despite this being our first production. We shared everything from animation notes to hair texture conversations! I really value black women mentoring each other in the workplace and advocating for each other's ideas and stories. When black women win, everyone wins!

## Lulu and Vanessa, what is the dream for Super Sema and Kukua? Will we see a movie one day?

[Vanessa] Of course we'll see the Super Sema movie premiere and when

we're done with the popcorn, we will rush home to put on our VR headsets and enter Sema's virtual lab. Then we'll grab Sema's 3D pizza printer toy just in time for dinner!

[Lulu] When we started Kukua we used to joke that the dream would be to win an Oscar, the Nobel Peace prize or both... all while preparing to IPO! But now we tell each other "Dream bigger." A simple yet effective and on the money phrase that can be applied to everyone in every situation and one we want the generation of the future to sing loudly.

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Article by Cleo McGee