

Q&A: Thebe Ikalafeng

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We chat to one of Africa's leading brand gurus about his appointment to the jury of the Red Dot Communication Design Awards.



"As Africa takes off, we need to ensure its pilots are African," says Thebe Ikalafeng.

[Thebe Ikalafeng](#) has facts and figures about Africa rolling off his tongue. The branding guru is a passionate, persuasive champion of the continent's innate creativity. He has witnessed it up close in all its diversity. As the founder and managing director of agency [Brand Leadership](#), Ikalafeng has travelled the length and breadth of the continent crafting campaigns for corporates, retailers, banks, universities and governments, even helping to get Presidents Atta Mills and John Mahama of Ghana elected in 2008 and 2012 respectively.

Ikalafeng is a master of the bird's-eye view, deftly sizing up a brand's impact while insisting that it respond to real conditions on the ground.

With a raft of awards, accolades and leadership positions on industry bodies under his belt, he is well-qualified to represent the continent as a judge of the [Red Dot Communication Design Awards](#) this year – the first person from Africa in the awards' 60-year history. He hopes that his invitation will lead to more Africans entering the global awards, he says.

As he prepares for the Red Dot judging in July, we ask him what he'll be looking for and what he brings to the jury panel.

What was your reaction when you were invited to judge the Red Dot Communication Design Awards?

South Africans have been on the juries of many other global platforms like Cannes Lion so I'm surprised we haven't been on this one until now. On the other hand, it speaks to the recognition of Africa broadly and South Africa especially as a major player. There is no doubt that Africa can contribute a different view to the world. We gave the world the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission. When the 2010 FIFA World Cup came here, everyone left mesmerized with a *vuvuzela*. The world is becoming aware of us.

So you see this as a symbolic moment for African design?

This is the African age – and moment. There is an upsurge of people creating technology in Africa, whether in Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana or Kenya. M-Pesa is now a global standard for money transfer. Konga in Nigeria and its innovative made-for-Africa payment fulfillment has made it difficult for the Amazons of the world to gain traction in Africa's biggest market. The dolos, designed in South Africa in the 1960s is the ubiquitous and most effective breakwater solution in the world.

African design has always been authentic because we have been needs-driven, and that's the way design should be. Design must solve business and society's problems.

What will you be looking for as a judge?

I will be looking for five things: Firstly, the insight behind the idea. What inspired the idea? Secondly, what is its unique value proposition? What does it do differently to all other solutions that exist? Then I will be looking to see how these carry the identity of the country without screaming it, while speaking to global needs. When you look at solutions that come out of Germany, for example, they are distinctively engineered-driven; things that come out of Paris carry a romanticism; American products reflect its entrepreneurial and winning spirit. Lastly, I will look at *how* they deliver it – the quality of their work – do they do what they promise to do? Is there an elegance in delivering the idea – design excellence?

How does this thinking apply to us in Africa?

The ultimate African challenge is how we can begin to create from Africa and serve the world so people say “that is from Africa and it is world class”. We need a consistent reaction similar to how [FIFA President] Sepp Blatter responded to the South African national stadium [the FNB Stadium in Soweto] – the Calabash. He said it was “as good if not better than Wembley Stadium in the UK, but distinctly African.”

But most importantly, design must help resolve African challenges, especially jobs – among youth who are the majority of the unemployed.

Like how RLG Mobile in Ghana became not just the #1 mobile brand, but also among the top youth employers and technology trainers with its Institute of Technology.

What do you hope your participation in the Red Dot Awards will accomplish?

I hope it will lead to future opportunities to invite other Africans to participate in these global events. We should participate not because we want the outside world to acknowledge us but because Africa must be a player in where the world is headed – not just as consumers but as contributors to the global agenda. The world is now more connected than ever. Design allows us to contribute to the global narrative and economy.

Has Africa had a branding problem – and how can we address it?

Africa has a branding opportunity. All other countries have a past; we have a future. Seventy percent of Africa's population is under 30. More than half of our youth is unemployed. That's a social enterprise opportunity. Governments need to ask how we can harness this youthful energy to answer the problem of unemployment and create solutions that inspire the world. We have

spent trillions and trillions of other people's money in aid, and returned more than that back to the 'donor' nations in interests, expatriate jobs and contracts. We need to look internally – to Africa. Intra-Africa trade is 13%, intra-Europe is 65%. If we increase that by only 1%, it is estimated that we'll generate over \$50 billion – that's our aid dependency wiped out.

While our continent has six of the top ten fastest growing economies in the world, we have in general mortgaged and outsourced its development.

If you look for example at the plethora of stadia and airports across Africa built by Chinese (with more often imported Chinese convicted labourers), other than many being substandard, all are similar and do not reflect the distinction and diversity of Africa. Those things should be built by, or at least with, Africans centrally engaged to give them an African texture.

How do you see the role of design in all of this?

In order for us to trade, we need to create solutions made in Africa. Design is the face of business and the manifestation of ideas. Design brings alive trade, brings alive our identity, passion and culture. To me, design is how you solve problems. Some of them you solve visually and some intellectually. The fact that MTN's 'pay as you go' was created in South Africa shows you what we are capable of.

[A brand] cannot come up with those solutions unless it immerses itself in the world [of its consumers]. We should not be recruiting people into the brands; we should look for how we can insert brands into people's lives. That's how global brands such as Samsung, Toyota and Coca Cola win. The former CEO of Samsung, K.K. Park, once told me that he's been to 53 of the 54 African countries and stayed in locals' homes. That's how Samsung's 'Built for Africa' philosophy inspired creativity in Africa and delivered solar-powered appliances such as laptops and fridges. It recognised that the energy challenges in Africa are not an obstacle but an inspiration – and opportunity, the source of Africa's creativity.

Which, of the countries you have visited on the continent, have you found the most fascinating?

Every country is fascinating because they each provide you with a fascinating set of challenges. I like to immerse myself in every country I visit – visually, culturally and intellectually – to understand how the people think, see or express themselves and solve problems.

Having said that, I was amazed at Rwanda. All African countries at some stage or another have been wronged. The choice is how you look at that history, or how you transcend that history. Ethiopia is the only one that hasn't been colonised, although it was occupied by the Italians for a while. But very few have been able to turn that around.

Rwanda in 20 years has been able to reimagine itself. It has shown the catalytic power of inspired leadership.

Its president, Paul Kagame, chose English [over French] as the national language because of a belief that the French and French Belgians wronged Rwanda – and most certainly suppressed diversity of national identity by promoting tribalism. Rwanda amazed me that its citizens were able to create a national identity out of the ruins of the 1994 massacre. Kigali is one of the cleanest cities in the whole world. They have a system where, on the third Saturday of the month, everyone is obliged to stay home and clean. A sense of responsibility is built into the national philosophy.

So when you think of Rwanda, you can imagine the type of products that will come out of there... they will reflect a sense of detail. The next best wax prints after the Dutch Vlisco fabrics come out

of Rwanda – which Spanish designers Inés Cuatrecasas and Marc Oliver saw as the opportunity to start a successful fashion label called Mille Collines (meaning “a thousand hills” in French – a unique feature of Rwanda) targeting high-income local residents. Yet again an opportunity that Africans should be leading – but aren’t.

I can highlight many other exciting and inspiring moments and ideas across all countries. As Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie says, there’s no single African story. We are 54 countries, all diverse and at different level of development – an exciting designer’s canvas. What will matter and make a difference is to ensure that as Africa is rising, the pilots are African.