

Branding expert **Thebe Ikalafeng** takes issue with two sources of symbolism that identify African institutions – the map of Africa and flags of African nations. “The African identity is in its people, their dreams, ambitions and goals,” he writes.

# Time to lose the ‘African’ identity



**“The map of Africa does not capture the essence of Africa – its collective vision or the dreams of Africans.”**

**I**N HIS ARTICLE ON *HOW TO WRITE ABOUT AFRICA*, Binyavanga Wainana “advises” to always use the words Africa or Safari, to “never have a picture of a well-adjusted African unless he or she has won the Nobel Prize or is a naked warrior in a Zulu, Masai or Dogon dress”. The characters must be corrupt politicians, polygamists, prostitutes and starving indigenous people ravaged by war and HIV/Aids or loyal servants, in contrast to the animals, which must be treated as well-rounded, complex characters with names and desires. The heroes – the white and tanned celebrities, aid workers and conservationists – must be projected as the preservers of Africa’s rich heritage.

**The trouble with African flags is that many of their attributes are reflective of the focus on Africa’s past**

Other than non-Africans with a romantic and possibly uninformed idea of the continent who are obviously the inspiration of Wainana’s satire, it seems this advice has been diligently followed by those developing brand identities for or in Africa.

What is of particular interest and intrigue to me, what I take issue with, are the two sources of inspiration and symbolism for identifying African institutions – the map of Africa and flags of African nations.

A casual scan through all African flags reveals two broad themes around symbolism and structure or shape – about a quarter of the flags feature a star or stars, and many use red, gold and green. The colours are often rationalised as reflecting African history: red represents the blood spilled during the struggle for Africa’s emancipation; gold for the mineral wealth, which symbolises Africa’s potential; while green represents fertility. The trouble is that many of these attributes are reflective of the focus on Africa’s past and present, rather than its future.

More prominently worrisome is that most major African institutions and initiatives, particularly those of a political or developmental nature such as Nepad, AfDB, the AU, Development Bank of South Africa, AGRA, and even the recent 2010 FIFA World Cup South Africa – just to name a few – feature the “obligatory” device Wainana recommends, and draw their inspiration from the shape of, or literally trace the map, of Africa.

Let us perhaps pardon the habit of using the word Africa with the pretext that it locates the initiative; but is the map necessary? Is the inspiration and vision for all these initiatives the same? Every theory in branding suggests, as branding expert Tom Peters said, it is best that “a logo is an entry

point to the brand”. It is the summation of the essence or vision. It is what binds all stakeholders.

A brand should signal a future yet unrealised and unseen, but hoped for – an aspiration, a motivator – something to which all strive. The map of Africa does not capture the essence of Africa – its collective vision or the dreams of Africans. While I am willing to accept the flag as an enduring symbol and embodiment of history, and perhaps, the people’s identity, I do not think that principle should not apply to referencing the shape of Africa as inspiration for creating developmental brand identities.

To compete and fulfil its potential and rise among the global giants, Africa does need a unified agenda, albeit executed through its various sovereign nation states.

And Africans or supporters of Africa, as Fela Kuti acutely warned, “must identify with Africa, then we’ll have an identity”. Identifying with Africa is not about locating Africa. Everybody knows where Africa is but many have no idea of what Africa is about. Africa is one billion Africans with thousands of languages and cultures. Africa is not a map, a colour or a symbol. The African identity is in its people.

Consequently, the African identity, as portrayed today, does not reflect the vision of the Africa for which we are striving. ■ **NA**



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