

Interview with Thebe Ikalafeng – Founder and Chairman of Brand Leadership Group

As a part of the City Nation Place project we are planning to profile place brand strategists from around the world.

Our first interview is with Thebe Ikalafeng – Founder and Chairman of Brand Leadership Group, whose role gives him a perspective on nation branding and on continent branding! We are delighted that Thebe will also be speaking at the first City Nation Place conference in London in November.

CNP: *How do you describe your current position to your friends and family?*

TI: I am working for a better Africa: Proud, independent, peaceful and prosperous. I believe in the power of brands as a catalyst for the African renaissance. My passion is to champion and build transformational African brands that help build and change the image of Africa.

CNP: *Is there one less well known special place or experience in Africa that you would like everyone to know about?*

TI: Two nations are probably worth noting. One has triumphed over tragedy and the other succeeded beyond the limitations of its size.

The first, Rwanda, led by the visionary Paul Kagame, has in just 20 years, gone from a Francophone nation allegedly ignored by France in its hour of need – and devastated by a 100-day 1994 genocide allegedly fueled by the tribal divisions promoted by Belgium which culminated with the genocidal mass slaughter of Tutsi and moderate Hutu in Rwanda by the Hutu majority, and has recovered to be a model of how to re-imagine a nation – and among the fastest growing economies in the world. It's probably the cleanest country in the world nestled on over 1,000 undulating green hills.

The other, Mauritius, an island nation in the Indian Ocean about 2,000 km off the southeast coast of the African continent, despite its \$12bn GDP it is the #1 nation in the 2014 Ibrahim Index of African Governance and the #1 most competitive African nation in the WEF Global Competitiveness Report, among several impressive accolades. It is attracting talent, investment and is challenging South Africa to be the leading business headquarters in Africa because of “relatively strong and transparent public institutions, clear property rights, strong judicial independence and efficient government,” according to the Global Competitiveness Report assessment. And just happens to have some of the finest beaches and resorts – a perfect blend of business and pleasure.

CNP: *If you could work on the strategy for any other city, region or nation around the world, which would it be and why?*

TI: Nigeria. This West African giant has not been able to live up to its destiny and potential in over 55 years of independence from Great Britain. There is no reason this nation – rich in natural resources, with the most travelled and educated citizens, distinctive cultural binds and identity, and confident and passionate citizens – should not be among the leading nations in the world – and Africa's best. The biggest problems of Nigeria – infrastructure and power- are a manifestation of a lack of decisive and consistent leadership, sustainable policies and corruption that have prohibited this nation from attaining its rightful stature in Africa and the world.

To build a successful nation brand requires visionary leadership with a clear plan of action – and enabling policies to catalyze investment, tourism, trade and citizenship.

The one thing Nigeria has right – is a collective national pride. No Nigerian ever runs away from their identity. No Nigerian can be mistaken for anything else but a Nigerian. Albeit much of the narrative of Nigerian identity is clouded by perceptions and legacies of corruption and cyber crime such as the 419 scandals. But Nigerian confidence and culture has been the fuel that's inspired the successful Nollywood that produces over 2,000 movies every year – more than Hollywood – and the infectious Afro-beat music popularized by the late iconic Fela Kuti.

Of course, what threatens Nigeria's progress is the undeniable progress over and above corruption, is the North/South religious/ethnic divide and individualistic tendencies. The devastating existence and wrath of Boko Haram has terrorized Nigerians and threatened regional security. The selfish pursuit of individualistic crowns has seen Nigerian elite attain the reputation of having the most number of private

jets, the most champagne consumption and private homes in the most elite European addresses – rather than reinvesting the wealth in Nigeria.

But luminary Nigerian leaders such as industrialist, Aliko Dangote, banker/philanthropist, Tony Elumelo, award-winning author, Chimamanda Adichie, are leading the way in exemplifying how the private sector and individuals can inspire the re-imagining of the Nigerian brand for Nigeria, for Africa and for the World.

There have been many initiatives to position Nigeria as the ‘heart of Africa’ and more recently as a ‘great nation, good people,’ but many have failed to gain traction primarily because they have been linked to political office rather built from the ground up, beyond politics and personalities.

But what a great nation – and an opportunity with intoxicating energy.

CNP: *What three character traits or skills do you think are necessary for someone working on place brand strategy?*

TI: Passion, patience and purpose. The difference between branding a place and a product is that in place branding one is accountable to everyone– the citizens, business, politicians, government – everyone has a stake in and owns the nation brand, whereas in other forms of branding, one is accountable primarily to shareholders. While commercial brands are primarily externally built often with tactile and visual emphasis, the nation brand is internally built – the culture, history, policies, public diplomacy and trade – over a long time. Commercial brands can be established relatively quickly, whereas nation brands take time. To accomplish that requires passion, purpose and patience.

CNP: *Who, outside of the place brand sector or your own government, inspires you?*

TI: Pope Francis has demonstrated the power and ability of an individual to be able to use their privileged position to transform an institution and capture the imagination of the world – just by following their consistent principles and values. He’s demonstrated that as a leader, your position is not a throne from which to rule, but an opportunity to make a difference. As a Catholic and reflecting on the challenges that our church has faced over the last 25 years or so, he has single-handedly begun the transformation of the church to make it relevant, responsive and restored it to its historical positioning as the most dominant and influential church in the world.

CNP: *Looking at the developing agenda for the City Nation Place conference in November, other than your own session, which presentation or discussion are you most looking forward to joining?*

TI: I’m looking forward to Dr. Hume Johnson, Founder and Chairman, The Re:Imagine Jamaica Project. Jamaica, despite its stated and known challenges, like Brasil, is one of the most romantic attractions in the world. The talent that has come out of Jamaica, from as far back as Bob Marley and Grace Jones to as recent as Usain Bolt in the arts and sport, in addition to the island’s natural beauty, has always made it punch above its weight – and made it an attractive place, particularly for tourism. As an African, where many of our nations face similar challenges of poverty, inequality, diseases and instability, there’s much we can learn from the likes of Jamaica, Brasil and India, about putting your best attributes ahead of your short-comings as a foundation for building a sustainable nation brand.

CNP: *To give people a better understanding of how you have come to be in your current role, please list your previous roles and the relevant dates.provide a short overview of your career for our readers*

TI: My corporate career started in brand marketing at Colgate Palmolive in New York in 1994 prior to relocating to Colgate Palmolive South Africa after completing my BSc and MBA in marketing at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and concluded as chief marketing officer for Nike for Africa. Since establishing Brand Leadership Group – a brand development, activation, management and investment firm in 2002, I’ve worked on over 100 branding assignments across corporate, consumer, public sector, politics and place disciplines, including Brand Ghana and Brand South Africa, Transnet in South Africa, Universities of South Africa and Botswana and Namibia University of Science and Technology, Zanaco Bank in Zambia, Mail&Guardian Africa in Kenya, MTN, Africa Green Revolution Forum in Tanzania and Ethiopia, Total Africa and the successful political branding and campaigns for the late Presidents Atta Mills and John Mahama of Ghana in 2008 and 2012 respectively. In 2009 I established Public Sector Excellence initiative to assess and recognize public sector institutions that are delivering on their mandate to citizens. In 2010 I established Brand Africa as a non-profit civil society movement to drive a positive image of Africa, affirm the continent’s identity and inspire its competitiveness. Working with Brand Finance plc, TNS Africa and African Business, in 2011 I established

Brand Africa 100, the first pan-African research, ranking and celebration of brands in Africa. In between I've consulted, written, lectured and spoken on brands and branding in over 60 countries across Africa and the rest of the world – and sit on the boards of WWF, Mercantile Bank, CarTrack, South African Tourism and Brand South Africa, and the advisory boards of African Business and Henley Africa.