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When Age-Old Wisdom for Life-Long Learning Becomes Innovative

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WHEN AGE-OLD WISDOM FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING BECOMES INNOVATIVE

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Abstract
The paper calls for a return to ancient knowledge left by our Kemetian ancestors about what it means to be human as well as the insights they gave about the purpose of human existence. The insights offered have the potential to provide a critical underpinning of educational processes designed for African leaders in the 21st century. The author shares her own vision for Africa, inherent in which are strategies for economic growth and poverty alleviation centred in the development of the African consciousness. The overall strategy for achieving this vision is identified as already laid out in the perennial wisdom of the ages as found in Kemet via the development of leadership and management qualities such as self-knowledge, control of thought, faith in one’s self, devotion to purpose and freedom from resentment under wrong.

Introduction

“The worst realities of our age are manufactured realities. It is therefore our task, as creative participants in the universe, to redream our world. The fact of possessing imaginations means that everything can be redreamed … Human beings are blessed with the necessity of transformations.” (Okri, 1997:49)

As a Human Resource (HR) and Organisational Behaviour (OB) educator and academic I am acutely aware of the untapped human potential and therefore potential competitive advantage that people bring to organisations and nations alike that are being wasted on a day in day out basis. This is no less true of the African potential especially that of Africa’s youth. Africa has a responsibility to study its reality to assess the extent to which it is a manufactured one, as noted by Okri above. This is in order to free itself through the imaginations of its own people in redreaming another preferred reality. In the process of redreaming, socialisation systems (such as our family, education and religions) and processes aimed at liberating our true inner potential are critical systems to be redreamed. Currently Africa uses uncritically educational systems institutionalised across the world as being the best without questioning why the outcomes for African peoples are not the best. Why are Africans not able to transcend their inferior standing in the world as an ethnic grouping? Is it the actual means (i.e. the educational systems, processes and underlying logic) of developing African potential that is in fact crippling it? For example, Gatto (2001) quotes H L Mencken as saying that the aim of public education is not:

To fill the young of the species with knowledge and awaken their intelligence … nothing could be further from the truth. The aim … is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardised citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. That is its aim in the United States and that is its aim everywhere else.

This idea may well help Africa to understand why its people are not achieving the best for themselves in terms of business growth and poverty alleviation, for example, when compared with the ‘developed world’. This is given that Africa has so conscientiously and meticulously copied systems and methods from the developed world. In the 21st century we have entered an era where there is a world-wide momentum towards developing self-consciousness and manufactured realities must no longer have the support of Africa, unwitting or otherwise, holding them in place. We have entered the era of African self-realisation and self-assertion. To more fully experience this self-realisation we have a duty and responsibility to develop
and expand our ethnic group consciousness via the type of educational and socialisation processes that places us as a people and an ethnic group at its centre (Wilson, 1993; Asante, 1991). The answers to economic growth and poverty alleviation in Africa are contained within the African consciousness and heart, whether on the continent of Africa or its Diaspora awaiting liberation. Unfortunately, slavery and colonisation have left their mark on the African psyche/consciousness and continues to be the major impediment to Africa’s ability to transcend the conditions we face as a group in the world. In this paper I, therefore, articulate a vision for Africa based on my own desires as an African in the Diaspora, but nevertheless one that is critical to the entire African experience. The means of achieving this vision is shared, using my own researched experience and drawing on the perennial knowledge of the ages. The crux or central thesis of this paper is that it is with our consciousness as a people that we must engage rather than the effects of consciousness. To change our current consciousness will result in changed outcomes. I argue that our current consciousness has been created through a dysfunctional ‘black socialisation’ process. What is required for Africans is a metanoia; a new way of seeing. Okri (1997) in the opening quote suggests we are ‘blessed’ as humans and, therefore, Africans with the necessity for transformations. The challenges we face are not an African challenge alone but a world challenge. It is, however, a challenge that Africa is positioned to lead the way on if she chooses to.

**A vision for Africa and Africans**

“The first joy, therefore, is the joy of service ... I have chosen to serve my fellow human beings, to soothe, if I can; to create beauty, if I am lucky; to hint at certain fundamental truths, if I am fortunate; and one way or another to give the best of myself to the world.”

(Okri, 1997:43)

As an individual African I too have committed myself to serve my fellow human beings through being of service to them in the world. Mystics have long understood service to be the ruling purpose of human life. Consequently, in holding in my imagination a vision of Africa reunited with her people across the globe and positioned on the world stage of life as a respected and valued ethnic grouping because she has earned that position having resurrected herself from her present conditions I am serving the task that faces me as a woman of African heritage today. I am doing what has to be done. Consequently, in my imagination, and therefore in my own life as an African, Africa has shown herself to have courage, inner strength, a spirit of forgiveness and a powerfully creative imagination which works as her saviour.

The most effective way of being of service that I have found is to be the change that I want to see in the world and to think globally even as I act locally believing that as I change myself I can in some way contribute to changing the world. In taking this stance I am using my imagination to see Africa in her ideal state of being and no longer buying into the manufactured reality of an African lack of efficacy and therefore dependency on others. What is true for Africa in my imagination is true for me the African individual. Consequently I live my life from this ideal place as if it were true irrespective of appearances or other points of view to the contrary. On the one hand this might, to some, seem like nothing more than mental gymnastics but the more discerning will recognise the deeper truths that this strategy contains and the possibilities for transformation inherent in it. However, it will take men and women of vision and imagination to walk this path with me; Africa needs more visionaries.
and more people who believe in the power of their imaginations. This is a paper for visionaries and for those who know how to work with their imagination.

**Living our ideals**
The planners of this conference may well have been looking for hard and concrete ideas as opposed to the focus of this paper on developing consciousness as the way forward. On deeper reflection it should become apparent, however, that we live in our imaginations all the time but largely unconsciously and more often than not burdened down by negative thinking. This is particularly true for us as Africans. We have been socialised through our long history as a people to understand life as being hard and a struggle for us when in fact the opposite can be equally true. Making a decision to leave this manufactured reality behind is a crucial one. Choosing to live from our ideal is the way forward for Africa and Africans. Living out our ideals requires us to become conscious of our imaginings and to become deliberate and focussed in how we use our imagination. It is a decision to become self-disciplined and to take our imaginings away from the negative and to focus only on our ideal. My ideal of a united and resurrected Africa is an ideal condition that I have determined I will live in.

**Locating Ideals**
How did I arrive at this ideal? In order to get in touch with this particular ideal as the answer to my life challenges I entered into myself to seek answers from my own *inner knowing* about how to resolve the difficulties I was experiencing in my life as a woman of African origin. The insight I gained is that there is no problem only a manufactured reality and into which I had been unwittingly socialised to believe. Years of looking outside of myself for answers had left me disillusioned and purposeless, struggling to find meaning in my life as a woman of African origin in Britain. Going within has been the key to all breakthroughs I have achieved. If the logic of my PhD research (Bravette, 1997) is correct, that to study the psychology of the individual at the micro-level is to gain important insights into the group at the macro-level, then the lesson for Africa is clear: she should also go within herself in order to gain the *intuitive* insights she is seeking to the resolution of her life challenges. Africa’s purpose must, by necessity, be underpinned by deep and insightful analysis of her historical journey as well as the challenges she has faced and especially those she has yet to transcend. At the individual level we are aware that life presents us with challenges to be met. It is evident to the world, if not Africa, that she has not yet met the challenges presented to her in terms of her colonisation and the enslavement of her people and the detriment that has resulted as a consequence. To scale the mountain of race identified by Langston Hughes (1970), which is our personal challenge as a group, we need to address the wounds of our history.

**Healing the wounds of the past**

> “Before we can create the world we must first unearth and destroy the myths and realities, the lies and propaganda which have been used to impress, enslave ... Facing the lies of history is a basic human responsibility. It is unpleasant to do but liberating to accomplish. It liberates us all.” (Okri, 1997:58)

To heal the wounds of the past I have been undergoing a metanoia, a perspective transformation. Africa too must heal the wounds of her past by undergoing her own metanoia. The most effective means I have found for healing the wounds of the past has been
through giving them creative meaning and so redeeming them. In the process we can then understand more clearly the lessons being brought but not recognised. In adopting this approach we gain freedom from resentment under persecution and wrong (ancient wisdom). Instead our vision and our purpose become our goal and reason for being: to realise ourselves in our fullness as our creator intended us to uniquely be and not as other ethnic tribes have sought to recreate us. Wilson (1993:52) has eloquently stated this point when he acknowledges:

“To discover our history is to discover our somethingness (beingness) before someone else created us. To come to know ourselves as we were prior to our re-creation by aliens means we will be in charge of our own becoming, the creators of our own consciousness, the creation of ourselves as namers of the world, the namers of ourselves which gives us the power of self-determination and self-direction.”

Healing the wounds of the past demands that we come into a knowledge of self as a people that goes beyond ‘black’ and/or African history and beyond the influence of the ‘white’ world in our lives. This is where ancient wisdom comes into its own because of the power it reveals that lies dormant within us.

**Age-Old Wisdom**

“There is no such thing as a powerless people. There are only those who have not seen and have not used their power and will. It would seem a miraculous feat, but it is possible for the unvalued ones to help create a beautiful new era in human history.” (Okri, 1997:103)

Age-old wisdom is like a salve that heals our wounds and restores us to ourselves, re-energising and re-motivating us in the process. It is said that when societies find themselves in chaos, confusion, malaise, even depression and any other condition that they find difficult to resolve they should do what people have done throughout the ages: return to the perennial wisdom of the ages left to us by our ancestors. In this way we step outside of our perceived problems in order to distinguish the real from the unreal. The perennial knowledge of the ages to which I am referring can be found in the wisdom teachings of the mystery schools of Ancient Kemet and continues to be available to us today if we are conscious and/or are ‘blessed’ with an awareness of these teachings. Such wisdom would normally be passed down via the ‘elemental bond that exists between the elder of the tribe and their young’ (Palmer, 1997) but which has been denied us since we have allowed ourselves to be subjugated and our wills pacified as a people. Given that our enslavers and colonisers did not only colonise our lands and people but also knowledge it is important for us to critically engage with the knowledge that has been developed over the ages and to follow the trail of these ancient teachings to see how they continue to manifest in the knowledge base of the world today.

**The purpose of life according to the Ancients**

In the mystery schools of Ancient Kemet the purpose of life was understood to be about gaining awareness of our oneness with the creator. Education was the process of achieving this goal. Education defined in Latin means to ‘draw out from latent potential’ that which already pre-exists inside. The primary methods of teaching were said to focus on the
development of character and the overcoming of basic character flaws. The 10 virtues that initiates were required to develop were:

- Control of thought
- Control of action
- Devotion to Purpose
- Faith in the Master’s ability to teach the truth
- Faith in one’s own ability to assimilate the truth
- Faith in one’s own ability to wield the truth
- Freedom from resentment under persecution
- Freedom from resentment under wrong
- Ability to distinguish the real from the unreal
- Ability to distinguish right from wrong

It is clear from a brief reflection on these principles that education was primarily an inner-oriented process. The process was comprehensive and involved the initiate gaining:

- Unity of self, unity of tribe and unity with nature
- Development of social responsibility
- Development of character
- Development of spiritual mastery/power (Hilliard, 1986)

Drawing comparisons between this system of education and that to which we are subjected today makes stark the differences. It also adds credence to Mencken’s view, shared earlier, about the underlying logic of public education systems across the world today. Real education, on the other hand, reveals the significance of this mystery school system without going back into history given that they can be understood as basic life skills and something we should all have an awareness of. However, this knowledge has been denied to us, the descendants of those African men and women who were enslaved, when our ancestors were refused education and spiritual practice and forced to act as if they were slaves instead of dignified men and women. This deprivation was to engender within the enslaved African a false consciousness where they came unwittingly to see and experience their white slave-masters as ‘gods’ given they had the power of life or death of the ‘slave’ at their fingertip. It is widely acknowledged that enslaved Africans were forced to undergo massive psychological transformations in order to survive the trauma of slavery (Patterson, 1973). Once the physical bonds of slavery were removed our ancestors simply moved on from slavery as if it had been a natural institution – unaware of the psychological transformation they had undergone and to which they had by this time become normalised. No widespread healing work has been carried out to date to heal this psychological trauma to ensure the rehabilitation of the African mind and psyche. This fact is the major cause as to why so many Africans in the Diaspora today do not identify with Africa and why Africa finds itself in its current condition in the world today. Instead the dysfunctional psychological processes enslaved Africans underwent in order to survive continue to be passed down their generations in the form of what I have named ‘black socialisation’ resulting in a form of ‘black consciousness’ which works against the interests of Africa and Africans as a whole.
Africans who remained on the continent did not remain free within themselves because of the devastating blow and perpetual influence that colonisation was designed to have on her psychological well-being as a people living under colonial rule on the continent. Ani (1991:1) describes how the ‘weapon of culture’ was used to subordinate the African consciousness and to pacify her will as follows:

“Europe’s political imperialistic success can be accredited not so much to superior military might, as to the weapon of culture. The former ensures more immediate control but requires continual physical force for the maintenance of power, while the latter succeeds in long-lasting dominance that enlists the cooperation of its victims (i.e. pacification of the will). The secret Europeans discovered early in their history is that culture carries rules for thinking and that if you could impose your culture on your victims you could limit the creativity of their vision, destroying their ability to act with will and intent and in their own interest.

The power of purpose
Being subordinated and miseducated into believing lies about ourselves as Africans has left us without a clear sense of purpose and therefore vision. We have not yet redreamed ourselves to be God’s chosen people the way other ethnic groups have done and in so doing give meaning to our group biography. Consequently, we struggle with knowing how to give meaning to the lives of our people. Identifying this wider connection with the universe is our primary task towards re-finding ourselves as a people and determining meaning for our lives. In my own individual case, I was only initially able to find purpose in terms of the sense of duty and responsibility I felt towards the children that I had biologically brought into the world. Over time as my devotion to the purpose of self-realisation has grown this sense of duty and responsibility as a mother has extended to a desire to serve the world. The lesson for Africa from this revelation is that she has a responsibility as a nation to create this vision for her people in Africa and in the Diaspora – visionary leadership is vital. Had this been done I would not have found myself with the sense of purposelessness and anomie that I found myself in and which I believe is indicative of the problems of young people of African origin in the Diaspora. Africa, also, would not be in the position she is today. Think of the cost of anomie and purposelessness amongst workers in a business organisation and multiply that to see the costs to a nation and a continent? What Africa has not realised is that she has everything she needs for her economic growth and poverty alleviation at her finger-tips, she has just not strategically marshalled her people (her human resources) across the globe to that end. Instead she continues to focus on external conditions and to perpetuate her resultant dependency on other ethnic groupings when history shows that all ethnic groups tend to be insular, competitive and self-serving.

Education for Life
Having educated myself, and having gained important insights into world history, I can now understand why as Africans we have been displaced and are invisible in the history of the known world. Kotkins (1993) in his book ‘Tribes of the 21st Century’ does not name Africans as one of the tribes set to dominate the 21st century. The current televised series ‘Millennium’ also does not include Africa as an ethnic group of any significance in the world. The only real statement made about Africa in this series is that she has never recovered from the impact of the enslavement of her people and the apportioning of Africa among European powers. We are invisible because we are invisible to ourselves because we continue to depend on another ethnic group for our sense of self. Kotkins does however name the three success
factors common to the tribes set to dominate the 21st century, namely: unity; the creation of global networks and lastly, openness to technological advancement and a willingness to learn from other cultures. It can be seen from closer scrutiny and deeper understanding of the 10 virtues that as these are taken on board we will also be developing these success factors as an intrinsic part of the process.

The educational process I have used as an individual to gain the understanding reflected in this paper is not the result of being taught by a teacher but that of becoming a self-directed learner. I have used a range of educational philosophies the major ones of which have been transformation and self-direction. It has involved a centricity approach as defined by Asante (1991). My goal has been the development of bicultural competence (Bravette, 1997) enabling me to understand and integrate the two warring dimensions of my psyche: the British and the African so that I can be an integrated whole human being. In the process I have come into an understanding of the importance and significance of ethnic groups to the well-being of child development and sense of self in the world for adults. I have used academic study to focus, analyse, interpret and make sense as opposed to imitate, as too many of us do as Africans. To quote Emerson: imitation is suicide.

**Africa’s Educational Choice**

Until Africa makes the decision to work with the psychological well-being of her people across the globe, one individual at a time, such calls as this current one for ideas as to strategies for economic growth and poverty alleviation will continue to be made. The resolution to Africa’s problems lies within her own consciousness. It is has Dubois has noted: Africans have no real self-consciousness because they continue to live through the consciousness of another world – the white world. Our ancestors from the mystery schools of Ancient Kemet left us with an excellent strategy. At the current time we, as Africans, have nothing to lose and everything to gain by testing out the utility of this path for ourselves. Koichira Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO, in officially designating 2004 as the year in which the costs of the enslavement of African men and women is to be remembered and institutionalised into memory has corrected an important ongoing omission. However, Matsuura, as a Japanese, was unable to make a statement about the damage imprinted on the psyche of Africa and its people and which our souls bears witness to as seen in our on-going condition in the world as a people. We are the only ones who can do this inner work drawing on age-old wisdom as our guide and mentor.

In the same way that Britain in 1988 reviewed and revised its own educational agenda in the Education Reform Act to ensure that the means of education was targeted at meeting national needs, Africa also needs to do the same in terms of its needs. The same principle can be seen in the case of the Lithuanian Free Market Institute (1999) dedicated, in its own words, to public education for ‘freedom and prosperity’.

**Concluding Management Implications**

A national sense of purpose effectively transmitted will invariably be translated into all aspects of national life. Education, including management and business education, is the most direct means of achieving this purpose. The outstanding management/business implication of this paper, therefore, is the necessity for Africa to focus on developing the human capital of her people via the development of her consciousness. Her current educational models are not providing her with her desired outcomes signalling time for urgent
change. The crucial question at the heart of all African enterprises must be: What is the African purpose for being? To decide on a response like: to be the best that she can be is a sound start. The next step is to develop and implement educational philosophies, strategies and tactics aimed at achieving this goal for every individual and business enterprise across the nation and continent. The questions are: Do I as an African have the courage and mental toughness to make this change in myself? Do I have the courage and mental toughness to be the change I want to see in the world where Africa is concerned? Will I as a management educator continue to educate and train our young to ensure their conformity to the status quo or will I rethink my management and educational practice to be the practice of freedom and transformational change? Will I trust enough in myself to know that the same creative intelligence that fuels the minds and intellect of the developed world is also abundantly available to the African mind only waiting to be recognised and accepted? The process of redreaming is not secondary to economic growth and poverty alleviation but prior to it.

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