

**Education for an African renaissance**  
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For over four decades, black South African pupils and students were subjected to lapping up inferior, debilitating education; ideologically shaped socialisation for servitude under the guise of Bantu education, Indian education, and Coloured education.

Education for an African renaissance seeks to raise some of the challenges that education in a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist society should address. These include a sense of efficacy, national self-positioning at centre stage and a deliberate discarding of a pervasive inferiority complex.

Be master of your own destiny!

Whatever else I say to you today may or may not be useful, but if your purpose is an African renaissance, there is nothing else I could share with you that would go to the heart of my message as this does:

Be master of your own destiny!

The concept of an African renaissance has become central to South Africa's vision as a country and the geo-political role of the African continent and its member states. No doubt there are a variety of nuances in the meaning of the concept, but there seems to be consensus about what is meant by an African renaissance.

It is a concept which has deep and diverse historical roots that can be traced from Marcus Garvey's attempts to rally the African diaspora; Frederick Douglass's vision of a proud and achieving black people; Kwame Nkrumah's anti-colonialism and the African political imperative, shared by the Pan Africanist Congress; Julius Nyerere's idealised primitivism of ujamaa; the emergence of a movement called Kwanzaa in the US; Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement; and finally through to today's most visible protagonists, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and, of course, Thabo Mbeki.

The African renaissance is prompted as much by fear and concern for Africa's future and the role of its people in the political economy of the world, as it is by the need to express a deep sense of pride, dignity and consciousness of being African. The call for an African renaissance is powerful, evocative and emotive. For many it conjures up images of the triumphant rise of the phoenix from the ashes, the awakening of the slumbering giant, the resurrection of the civilisations and empires of Gao, Timbuktu and Monomotapa. The image it most often conjures up, is one of a people once great and powerful, who only have to reach very deep into their past to be great once again. This perspective that venerates the past, that elevates tradition, though important for the sense of history, forces us into tortuous logic and revisionism in trying to locate our place and role as a people today and in the future.

## Differences

On the other hand, the image it could convey is that of a clean slate, a greenfield opportunity to leap-frog over old and current political and social systems, technologies and deficient infrastructures. The differences in perspectives are about whether we should focus on the past or the future.

I should like to propose that the African renaissance should be about our magnificent future, not our glorious past. The distinction is extremely important because it directs our efforts about the content and purpose of our education. Simply put, my thesis to you is that education for an African renaissance is about how to visualise and create a future for Africa, as opposed to how to recall and recreate Africa's great past. That we should focus on the future instead of the past is not nearly as self-evident as it may appear. Our need for self-affirmation as a people, the need to instil racial pride, the need to eradicate the dehumanising, humiliating image of the current African condition, inexorably leads us to romanticise the past, to reach for those moments in the past which we can uphold as evidence of our ability and worth as a people.

This orientation has led to a situation where there is advocacy for education to be primarily about revisionism, especially in history. This is exemplified most visibly in the US among African Americans and their movements such as Kwanzaa, which claim for Africa the origin of man, science, mathematics, law, medicine and technology, and even that Jesus Christ was a black man! That may well be so, but for the African renaissance that I wish to talk about, this is of no consequence, and in terms of the implications for education for an African renaissance, it may well be counterproductive unless it is managed carefully. This line of thinking has led to serious pedagogical debates about the ideological content of a variety of subjects, most notably history and the social sciences, but including those that are ostensibly value-free such as mathematics and the natural sciences. Our debates in this arena are informed more by our reaction to perceived intellectual imperialism and neo-colonialism, and in our quest to assert our Africanness, our propensity has been to challenge and reject that knowledge whose heritage we could not claim.

## Propositions

The propositions I wish to posit about education for an African renaissance are as follows:

It matters not where the knowledge originated

It matters not what the ideological slant of the knowledge is

It matters not if we cannot claim the knowledge as part of our intellectual heritage

What matters, is the purpose to which the education is pointed.

If the education is not fit for the intended purpose, then it is of no use whatsoever. The only key thing therefore is to determine what purpose we should put our education to. Our vision should be to put our education to the purpose of achieving an African renaissance. The essence of the African renaissance is to enable us, as a people, to be masters of our own destiny.

Perhaps we can share some thoughts about education and its contribution to the renaissance.

### **Reality**

Education is the process of acquiring knowledge. Knowledge is reality, a recognition of fact as opposed to fantasy, desire or wish. Man's mind or his brain is his only tool of knowledge. Not his heart, not his gut, not his feelings. By his sensory perceptions, man assimilates facts and by a process of thought, a process of applying reason, he conceptualises and categorises these facts. When he has conceptualised and categorised these facts by applying thought and reason, he has acquired knowledge. The act of perception is involuntary. The process of thought, of applying reason is not involuntary, it is not automatic. It is volitional, it is by choice and it has to be learned. The process of learning how to exercise that volition, the learning of applying thought to fact, is called education.

The capacity to apply high-quality reasoning constantly and consistently and thereby to create knowledge, is called intellect. It is important to apply this intellect constantly because knowledge is perishable, it is overtaken by new challenges, new theories and a new understanding of the world around us. Today's knowledge is tomorrow's history.

Only by the process of education is man able to deal with his environment. Man by nature aspires to life, liberty and happiness. He therefore uses his knowledge to create for himself an environment that is safe, that he can derive sustenance from, and in which he may achieve self-actualisation. Man does not adapt to his environment. He adapts his environment to suit him.

When the environment becomes inhospitable to an animal species, the animal migrates or becomes extinct; when the environment becomes inhospitable to the human species, the human adapts his environment.

When pestilence afflicts animals they perish; when pestilence afflicts man, he develops preventative and/or curative solutions to control and eradicate disease.

When scarcity of food afflicts animals, they perish; when scarcity of food afflicts man, he devises agriculture, industry and biotechnology to create and store food.

When the animal kingdom is afflicted by predators, the animals live in fear; when the human kingdom is afflicted by predators, man devises rules, laws and government and other social institutions to render the environment safe.

### **Means of survival**

Therefore, man's only means of survival is his intellect acquired through education. The only true source of survival, wealth and self-actualisation is intellectual capital. The route to an African renaissance lies through the development of intellectual capital. The importance of intellect is not so much the ability to reason per se, but more so the corollary ability to direct and influence events, to have control over one's environment and one's

own fate.

This belief, that one is master of one's own destiny, as an individual or as a people, is called a sense of efficacy. A lack of sense of efficacy in a people means that as a people we consider ourselves subject to the elements; subject to our environment; subject to fate; subject to the will of others; subject to Providence.

Changes in the environment are determined by forces other than self and one's well-being is determined by the courtesy of a benign environment or the goodwill of others, and even more unpardonable, one believes it is natural that it should be so, and is timidly resigned to the fact.

A people without efficacy is reduced to desire without an understanding of how, much less the ability, to satisfy this desire. In many instances these people pursue courses of action that have no rational connection with, or that are contrary to their stated goals. A culture of dependency develops in such a people, a culture of poverty, a culture of no achievement, a culture of no self-esteem.

No dignity. No pride.

Thus, we observe a people that seeks and expects hand-outs, donations and alms at every opportunity. We observe a people that seeks survival and prosperity by stealing and looting. We observe a people with low standards of personal and public morality. We observe a people that expects to be taught rather than to learn. We see a people who have perfected the art of blame. They blame colonialism, they blame imperialism, they blame apartheid, they blame capitalism, they blame the government, they blame nature, they blame God.

This is a victim mentality.

Regrettably, this is a condition that best seems to describe Africa, a victim of the elements, a surrogate of external powers, unable to provide for basic human needs, incapable of upholding basic human rights and incapable of dealing with other nations as equals.

Contrast this briefly with the "can-do" attitude of the Americans, the Europeans' belief that they are the fountain of all knowledge and civilisation; the Chinese people's belief that they are the centre of the universe; and the Jews' belief that they are God's chosen people. All of these people have, at the heart of their national psyche, the innate knowledge that they are masters of their own destiny - they make things happen, things do not happen to them.

### **Important**

An important attribute that leads to their success is treating tradition and the past with respect but not being beholden to it. Another important attribute is the willingness to seek out and embrace knowledge and technology from other peoples. Yet another important attribute is an ability to constantly push back the knowledge barrier, to constantly learn

new things and to create new knowledge. They have recognised that in today's world, knowledge is almost instantly perishable and that the only valuable currency is constant learning, constant application of intellect. Most importantly, they know that knowledge cannot be owned, it is not property. It is there for assimilation and application by any .and all who desire to. Witness the Asian experience, from the Japans, Taiwans and Koreas of yesteryear, to the Singapores and Malaysias of today, which have made a shining virtue of importing and constantly borrowing skills, knowledge and technology from others and applying it to their benefit. Today they export knowledge about technology, industry and productivity.

By contrast, the African approach by and large has been to quibble about the Afrocentricity or Eurocentricity of knowledge, and to venerate the pedigree of knowledge - the older and more established the knowledge, the better; the deeper it reaches into established culture, tradition and mores, the better.

Education for an African renaissance must take a different world-view. It must take as its point of departure the premise that education is more about how to deal with the future and not how to deal with the past. It must take as its point of departure the premise that Africa's future is infinitely more important than Africa's history. It must recognise that in education there is no shame in borrowing from those who have travelled the road before you, that in fact the core of education is learning from the experience of others as opposed to learning from one's own experience. It must take as its point of departure the fact that education is a life-long pursuit that only begins at graduation.

### **Unquenchable quest**

Therefore, in conclusion, may this day, like all our other graduation days, symbolically mark the demise of ignorance for us as a people. May this day hail the rebirth and advent of an unquenchable quest for knowledge. Our challenge as a people as we graduate for an African renaissance, as we gird our loins for an African awakening, is to commit and dedicate ourselves to continuous learning, to constantly renewing ourselves as individuals and reinventing ourselves as a nation. In his now famous "I am an African" address to the Constitutional Assembly on 8 May 1996, Thabo Mbeki concluded as follows:

"Whoever we may be, whatever our immediate interest, however much we carry baggage from our past, however much we have been caught by the fashion of cynicism and the loss of faith in the capacity of the people, let us err today and say - nothing can stop us now!"

The unstoppable African that Thabo Mbeki talks about, the unstoppable African who is assembled here today and graduating shall be:

An African who is master of his destiny

An African who has vision

An African who is a profoundly moral being

An African who has integrity

An African who is able and competent

An African who takes responsibility for his actions

## Dr. Reuel J. Khoza

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An African who pushes back the frontiers of knowledge

An African who builds the future

An African who leads a renaissance

An African who, when she looks in the mirror, sees the hand of God.