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Education for an African Renaissance; Providing Solutions for Africa

They call this 'the dark continent'. For the wrong reasons. Yes, Africa has known its darkness. It has known the darkness of oppression. Its guises are many but perhaps the most insidious is that of intellectual suppression. The suppression of thought, of ideas, of imagination. The darkness is similar to that of Europe in the Dark Ages, before the Age of Enlightenment, when tyranny and oppression reigned supreme.

For more than five decades, black South African learners were subjected to inferior, debilitating education; ideologically shaped socialization for servitude under the guise of Bantu education, Indian education and Coloured education.

And from Freedom, came the ideal of Education for an African Renaissance.

Before I focus my attention on the theme I chose for this occasion, namely Education for an African Renaissance, which resonates with the University of Limpopo's motto: Providing solutions for africa; may I briefly reflect on what I perceive to be the University's current situation and its cardinal challenge. It is:

A university repositioned as University of Limpopo - a new beginning as the first decade of the 21st century unfolds.

A university in the Province that is home to the ninth century civilization and pioneering political economy of Maphungubwe.

A university at whose doorstep is the well-nigh unfathomable wealth of platinum, the quality and magnitude of which leaves a world hungry for precious metals agape with amazement.

A university that is in a province which is home to one of Africa's tourism meccas, manifest in the Waterberg and adjacent areas, yearning for guests from the world over.

A university which, through its Medunsa and Turfloop campuses has produced medical doctors, pharmacists, dentists, lawyers (including judges), business people, educationists, who successfully exploded the myth and stereotype of pervasive inferiority as so-called bush colleges and universities.

A university which produced Abraham Tiro!

So we have no reason to self-denigrate. In as much as the University of Witwatersrand, more specifically its geology and engineering faculties, were predicated on and essentially funded by proceeds from the Reef gold mines, the University of

Limpopo could be relaunched, funded and given greater impetus by proceeds from our own platinum basin. Such resources could very well catapult us to a world beating institution.

This university is, however, not without its disadvantages, not without its historical and geographical constraints. The issue is whether you choose to see the glass as half full or half empty and what you choose to do about it. As a university whose motto and mission is "Providing Solutions for Africa", I guess one's stance is clear. We purposefully and emphatically refuse to be conditioned by circumstances imposed by a past of slavery, colonialism, neo colonialism, racism and apartheid. We choose to help create a new world characterized by the rule of law, human rights, socio-economic development and prosperity.

We shall be masters and mistresses of our own destiny, singing our own songs, dancing to our own tune and marching to our own brisk rhythm as we take on a rapidly globalizing and fiercely competitive world.

Venerable professors, honoured academics, students, ladies and gentlemen. I salute you!

Education for an African Renaissance seeks to raise issues that education in a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist society should address. Issues such as a collective sense of efficacy; the positioning of nationhood at centre-stage; and the shaking off -once and for all - of Africa's inferiority complex.

The concept of African Renaissance has become central to South Africa's vision as a nation. Beyond our borders, it is shaping the geopolitical role of the entire continent. And while there may be nuances around the meaning of Education for an African

Renaissance, there is a seeming consensus about what is meant by the African Renaissance.

The concept of African Renaissance has deep and diverse historical roots that can be traced back to Marcus Garvey's attempts to rally the African Diaspora, Frederick Douglass' vision of emancipation and enfranchisement, Kwame Nkrumah's anti-colonialism and the African political imperative, espoused also by Sobukwe's Pan Africanism; Julius Nyerere's primitivism of ujamaa; the emergence of the Kwanzaa movement in the United States, Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement and finally, through to today's most visible protagonists of the African Renaissance: Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, former Namibian Prime Minister Hage G. Geingob and, of course, our own President 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 an African. The call for an African Renaissance is powerful, evocative and emotive.

For many it conjures images of the triumphant rise of the Phoenix, the awakening of the slumbering giant, the resurrection of the civilizations and empires of Gao, Timbuktu, Maphungubwe and Monomotapa. The image most often conjured 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 most 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.

On the other hand, the image it could convey is that of a clean slate, a greenfield opportunity to leap-frog old and current repressive 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 propose that the African Renaissance should be about our potentially magnificent future, not our apparently glorious past. The distinction is extremely important because it directs our efforts about the content and purpose of our education. Simply put, my proposal to you is that Education for an African Renaissance is about how to visualize and create a future for Africa and her people, 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 inherent need for self-affirmation as a people, the need to instill racial pride, the need to eradicate the dehumanizing, humiliating image of the current African condition, inexorably leads us to romanticize 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 should be of no consequence, and in terms of the implications for an Education for African Renaissance it may well be counterproductive unless it is carefully managed.

This line of thinking has led us to serious pedagogical debates: about the ideological content of subjects, most notably history, and the social sciences, but including those that are ostensibly value-free such a 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 as our own.

But most surely, it matters not wherefrom knowledge originates; it matters not what the ideological slant of the knowledge is; it matters not if we cannot claim the knowledge as being part of our intellectual heritage. What matters, is the purpose to which the knowledge is put.

Our vision should be to put our education towards achieving an African Renaissance, for what is an African Renaissance but the realization of a people that they can be masters of their own destiny?

Education is the process of acquiring knowledge. And knowledge is about reality, a recognition of fact as opposed to fantasy, desire or wish.

A person's mind is their only tool for knowledge; not their heart; not their gut, not their feelings.

Through sensory perceptions, we assimilate facts and by a process of thought, by a process of applying reason, we conceptualise and categorise these facts. When we have conceptualised and categorized these facts by applying thought and reason, what we have done is acquire knowledge.

The act of perception is involuntary. The process of thought, of applying reason is not involuntary, it is not automatic. It is an act of volition, of choice: one which 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 constantly and consistently apply high-quality reasoning 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 new understanding of the world around us. Today's knowledge is tomorrow's history.

Only by the process of education are people able to deal with their environment. Humanity, by its very nature, aspires to life, freedom and happiness. We therefore use our knowledge to create for ourselves an environment that is safe, and from which we can derive sustenance. And it is in this environment that we can achieve self-actualisation. People do not adapt to their environment. We adapt the environment to suit and serve our interests.

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 being adapts the environment to its core needs. When pestilence afflicts animals they perish; when pestilence afflicts humanity, we develop preventative and/or curative solutions to control and eradicate disease. When scarcity of food afflicts animals they perish, when scarcity of food afflicts people, we devise 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, humans devise rules, laws, governments and social institutions to render our environment safe.

Indeed, our only means of survival is intellect, which is 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 our African intellectual capital. The importance of intellect is not so much the ability to reason per se, but more the corollary ability to direct and influence events in order to have control over one's environment and one's own destiny.

This belief, that one is the master of one's own destiny, whether as an individual or as a people, is called a sense of efficacy. Lacking a sense of efficacy 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 oneself and one's well-being is determined by the courtesy of a benign environment or by the goodwill of others, and even more unpardonable, one

believes it natural that it be so, and is timidly resigned to the fact. A people without efficacy are reduced to desire without an understanding of how, much less the ability to satisfy this desire. In many instances they pursue courses of action that have no rational connection with, or that are contrary to their stated goals. They do not understand cause and effect. 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 seek and expect handouts, donations and alms at every opportunity. We observe a people that seek 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 globalization, they blame government, they blame nature, they blame God.

This is a victim mentality.

Regrettably, this condition has been used 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.

Compare this victim mentality, if you will, to the mindsets of other nation states. Consider the sense of invincibility of the Americans; their irrepressible 'can do' attitude epitomized by their belief that they can put man on the moon.

Compare the victim mentality of Africa to the assertiveness of the European mindset. In 1986 the Single European Act created the single market, with its principle of the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour. It set in motion a bold plan: to create the largest single market in the world. The plan was accompanied by a set of social legislation too: to protect the rights of workers. Eurosceptics had only to compare the experience of Europe in the last fifty years to the experience of Europe in the previous fifty to that, to see the plan flourish - from being the centre of a world war and the Holocaust, to a largely peaceful, prosperous and confident union.

There are other comparisons that throw into light the darkness of Africa's victim-thinking. The new China/ for example, that has plainly left behind obeisance to the canons of Confucianism and the later cruelties of Mao, to boast the world's fastest growing economy. But as different as these national mindsets are, they all have in common this one truth: the innate knowledge that as nations they are masters of their own destinies. They, and they alone, can Make Things Happen.

In 2001, NEPAD or the New Partnership for Africa's Development marked the beginning of Africa's plan for revival - the blueprint, if you will, for the African Renaissance. A strategic framework arising from a mandate given to the five initiating Heads of State (Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa) by the OAU, NEPAD is a programme of action anchored on the development of Africa through the sustainable use of its resources and the resourcefulness of its people.

Under the right leadership, and with the support of Africans across the continent, NEPAD

can and should Make Things Happen.

But what other lessons are there for Africa from the rest of the world? Surely, the willingness to seek out and embrace knowledge and technology from others. For is it not by assimilation and application by those who desire it most, that knowledge takes root? Witness the Asian experience - from Japan, Taiwan and Korea of yesteryear; to Singapore, Malaysia and China of today. These are people who have made a shining virtue of importing and constantly borrowing skills, knowledge and technology from others and applying it to their benefit. Today it is they who export knowledge about technology, industry and productivity.

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

Education for an African Renaissance must reject this view. It must forsake the premise that education is more about how to deal with the past rather than how to embrace the future. It must discard the premise that Africa's past is infinitely more important than Africa's future. It must recognize 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 more from the experience of others than from one's own experience.

Therefore, may this day 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 to an African Renaissance, is to commit and dedicate ourselves to continuous learning, to constantly renewing and reinventing ourselves as individuals and as a nation.

In terms of implementation:

Unless our institutional leadership is imbued with a compelling vision, articulated in a compelling manner and pursued through exemplary leadership.

Unless our administration has clear policies, is strict in their application particularly where budgetary and financial matters are concerned.

Unless our academic staff is dedicated to a culture of diligence and excellence - unrelenting in its pursuit.

Unless our students deeply appreciate that education is the key to addressing their own personal challenges and those of the country, the region and the continent.

Unless our research and development, be they in geology, tropical diseases, health care, law, commerce and the social sciences, doggedly chase innovation.

Unless the University of Limpopo's Council and Senate as Administrative and Academic Governance bodies, insist without compromise on the strict adherence to policies, diligent and dogged pursuit of world-class academic and research standards, our noble

quest to PROVIDE SOLUTIONS FOR AFRICA will be an illusion turned existential nightmare for this and future generations, nationally and continentally. A consequence we dare not even contemplate.

We now live in a democracy in which academic excellence could very well thrive.

Just as freedoms are considered indivisible, excellence is also indivisible. It cannot be expected that our students can produce academic excellence when the lecturers and other resources accorded to them are sub-standard; it cannot be expected that students will produce academic excellence if they are ill-prepared and fail to apply themselves; it cannot be expected that lecturers will produce academic excellence if they are not oriented and dedicated towards academic excellence; it cannot be expected that the academic staff can produce academic excellence if the support from the administration is absent or at best shambolic; it cannot be expected that institutions will produce academic excellence if they operate in an environment hostile to all the freedoms associated with democracy; it cannot be expected that institutions can produce academic excellence where they cannot master adequate resources.

It therefore behoves us to maintain the academic and other freedoms we currently enjoy in South Africa. It behoves us to conserve and judiciously apply the available resources that are dedicated towards academic pursuit. It behoves us to ensure an efficient and effective administration and organizational support to enable academia to focus on academic pursuit. It behoves us to encourage and insist on application by academic staff and students towards world-class performance and delivery.

Ours is to reinvent and redefine ourselves into an African University of reference. To reposition ourselves as an institution of higher learning deserving of unconditional respect, continentally and globally, because we are quintessential centre of excellence. Quintessential centre of excellence because our administration and financial management are beyond reproach. A university of reference because our academic standards are world-class and aspirant students view us as their university of first choice and not one of last resort. A desirable centre of scholarship excellence because our research and development in certain disciplines is at the cutting edge. The mere mention of University of Limpopo (UL) should conjure up images of excellence akin to those of the Ivy League Universities in the USA. We should stop at nothing in realizing this.

In his now famous “I am an African” address to the Constitutional Assembly in May 1996, Thabo Mbeki said;

“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?”

I think also of an earlier Renaissance Man, African-American abolitionist, editor, orator, author, statesman and reformer, Frederick Douglass. He was once a slave, then he became a free man, but always, always he was a free thinker. This is Frederick Douglass on the issue of self-determination.

“Our destiny is largely in our hands. If we find, we shall have to seek. If we succeed in the

race of life it must be by our own energies and by our own exertions. Others may clear the road, but we must go forward, or be left behind in the race for life. If we remain poor and dependant, the riches of other men will not avail us. If we are ignorant, the intelligence of other men will do but little for us. If we are foolish, the wisdom of other men will not guide us. If we are wasteful of time and money, the economy of other men will only make our destitution the more disgraceful and hurtful”.

In conclusion, I end with a call to action. Here within the hallowed hall of the University of Limpopo, named after the bold, visionary martyr of our liberation struggle, Abraham Onkgopotse Tiro, I call on students, on their lecturers, on the honourable body of academia that is the University of Limpopo: be brave, be dogged, be daring. The solutions are there for the taking!

Thank you.