

Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Education and Africa: the Challenge of Epistemicide and Excentric Educational System and Practice©

by

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Abstract

Africa is blessed with an abundance of resources – human, natural and spiritual. The resources abound under the earth, above the earth and also in the human population. The variegated geography and climate ensures there is a floral and fauna variety which constitute a template on which Africans have traditionally survived and thrived to create civilizations and cultures. However, with the visitation of colonialism, slavery, cemented through concerted epistemicide, the resources of Africa – human and natural – were expropriated, appropriated and vandalized. A form of vandalism, destruction, denial and capturing of all spaces of being and existence of Africa and Africans took place over hundreds of years. It was this which denuded the African material and intellectual spaces of intrinsic validity. The effect has been the loss of indigenous knowledge systems to Africa and Africans who were the original creators and users of these. As we enter into a new phase of wealth creation and management, it is significant that knowledge, as knowledge for knowing sake and for doing and controlling reality, now looms large in the determination of prosperity of nations and societies. Countries with little or no natural resources have grown into international dominance and prosperity through the development of knowledge societies. It is argued in this paper that Africa and the African Diaspora has a duty to posterity to research, document and develop the indigenous knowledge systems as the foundations for sustainable wealth for global Africa and Africans.

Keywords: Indigenous, knowledge, epistemicide, agriculture, pharmacology, pharmaceuticals, architecture, toxicology, technology, health, education

Introduction

The frontiers of global control of power have shifted considerably in the last hundred years. The advent of computer information technology, the expansion of knowledge in the areas biotechnological engineering and the advances in space research have transformed the modes of being and existence of humanity forever. What the industrial revolution began, with the creation of wealth, through the mass production of goods and services, breeding self-sustaining capitalistic mechanisms, has now been perfected into virtual production and real wealth development. Bloggers now command resources which even the soft-ware developers can only ogle at a distance.

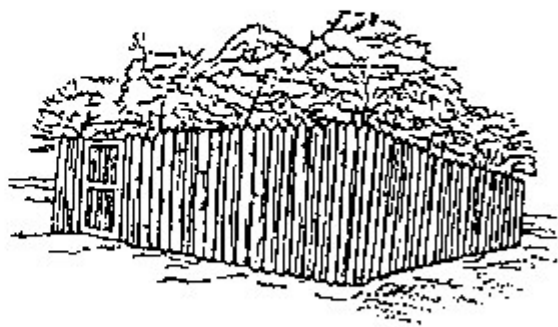
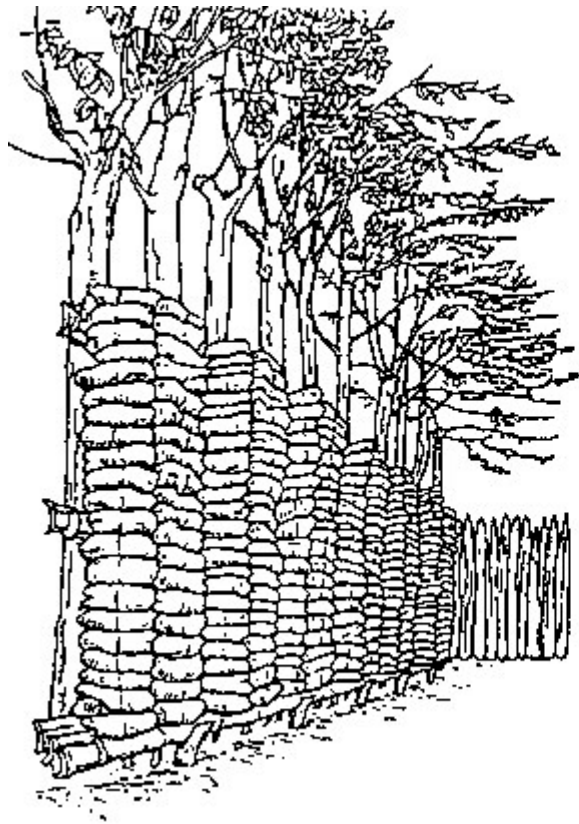
More significantly, we now find that the 21st Century will reward not so much the owners of natural resources but those communities which can best transform knowledge into products and services which are in demand. Those societies which remain at the level of primary or raw materials producers are eternally condemned to that bottom of the income pile and will continue to be indebted to those who manipulate data, resources and ideas to generate further ideas and wealth. This is a trend that has been unleashed by the advances in the sciences, technology and communications systems which we have seen develop over a period of a century. Africa has not fared too well in this arena, and much of the resources of Africa are under-utilized, under-valued and under-appreciated. This has made Africa to be dependent, in spite of the vast human and natural resources that abound in the continent. Even more critical is the way and manner in which many African countries are now directly or otherwise controlled by external agencies in the determination of the use of resources, thereby ensuring that only little added value is generated locally and in the process ensuring that the bigger part of the benefit that should have accrued to the local population are actually repatriated by the external agencies and their partners.

In this essay I examine the correlations that exist between knowledge control, resource control and destiny control across the spectrum of global power relations. I argue that societies which fail to take deliberate control over the soft side of resource development and utilization, as manifested in indigenous knowledge development and application, always tend to bear the brunt of whatever variations and negative irruptions occur in global economic problems. Our discussion is, however, not done in a format predicated on material which would allow for reducing the issues at stake to pure measurement in terms of GDP or FDI, as these are not ends in themselves but means to understanding the bigger picture of what is happening in terms of human development, standard of living, clemency of environment in terms of conducting to life and the realization of individual and community goals.

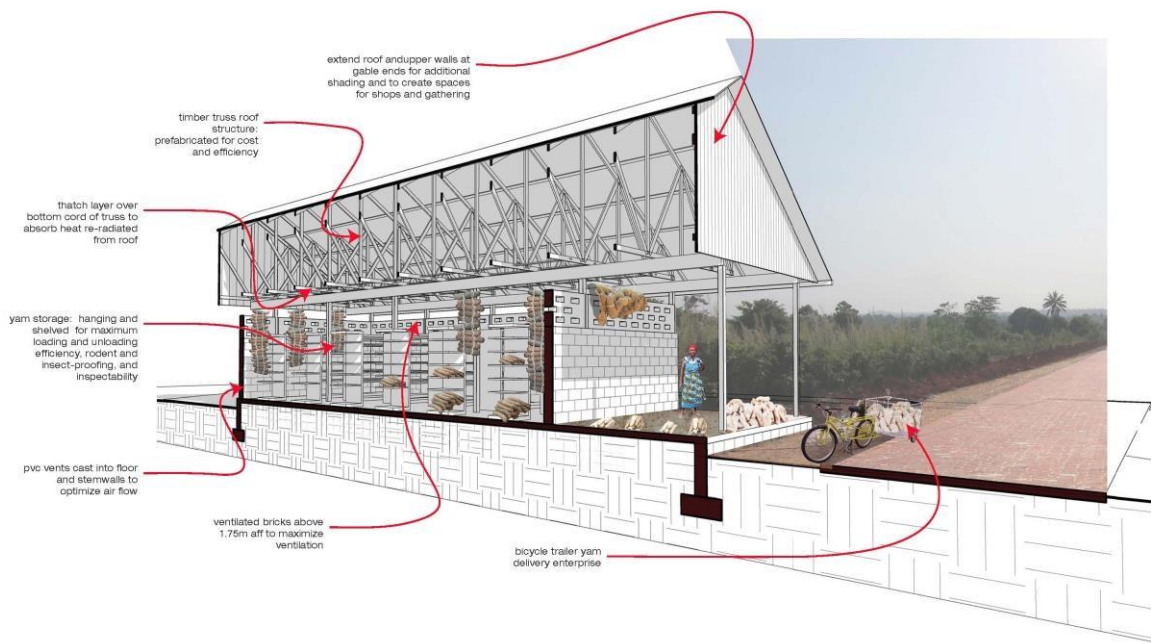
Agriculture

Indigenous peoples of the world have developed, adapted and perfected the means of utilizing the indigenous knowledge accumulated over millennia to provide for themselves. What may have been difficult to undertake, which science and technology advancements should assist in doing, has been the preservation and better distribution of food over a longer period of time and over a wider geographical area. To this end, each human community adopted and adapted the most ecologically friendly and sustainable crops, animal husbandry, floral development and fauna management. Even the types of crops that were developed, which then determined the dietary products and habits were based on climate, capacity for reproduction and preservation. In the tropics, as the case of Nigeria will show, tubers and legumes, fruits and vegetables were developed. Diets were balanced with the use of animal protein and fish resources.

What is clear is that indigenous communities have accumulated, over many years, various tested and proven scientific and practical knowledge for proper handling, cultivation and harvesting of crops in such a way as to maximize yield, quality and quantity. In West Africa, tubers were cultivated, harvested and preserved in various ways which showed a proper understanding of the task on hand. Because yam has creeping stem which does not do too well left to grow unsupported on the ground, various methods of staking are provided, from table to vertical staking. While after harvest, various methods are devised to preserve the yams for times when they will be needed or sold. We could look at traditional examples given as provided below:



Modern example:



What seems quite clear in the above is that indigenous societies have not been unmindful of the need to store and preserve excess food for times when these are not freshly available. What has to be done is to ensure that a combination of approaches are undertaken to assure that there is no scarcity during periods when fresh yams are not available. Some of the practices which have been combined with the barn storage, shed, table and ground storage is dousing in chemicals to prevent rot and infestation by pests.

Clearly, it would seem that what needs to be done is to harness the indigenous knowledge and practices, while researching and developing further on these to preserve products. Even more important are efforts to process, market and distribute products beyond the immediate production regions, to ensure sustainability and food security. What has been done with Iyan Ado and other Pouno Yam systems is important, and this ensure that the farmers get good prices for their effort, because yam can now be used throughout the year and not just in the months of harvesting. Further, irrigation has shown that crops can be produced throughout the year.

There is a present and immediate danger lurking with the globalization of fast food systems which pander only to processed, Western and alien culinary habits. The multiplication of junk food centres presenting French fries and other unhealthy food in metropolitan Africa has the potential of damaging the health of local communities, leading to various diseases which are alien coming into these regions. But the utilization of indigenous, less processed food products and the freshness attained has the capacity to ensure that the health issues attendant to the embrace of foreign culinary habits are reduced. **Alternative Medicine**

There is no doubt that modern medicine has been able to assist humanity in the battle against disease, premature death and other avoidable or treatable ailments. For this we must thank the advances in medical and technological developments over the last 100 years. But what is important is that we do not forget that modern medicine evolved from traditional medical practices that are found in various parts of the world. The difference is that traditional medical practices are more ecologically based and utilize the innate self-corrective mechanisms to ward off disease and to repair damage.

To this extent, it is suggested that the indigenous medical knowledge found in various parts of Africa, which being non-intrusive or non-invasive and depending largely on total or holistic approach should become the foundation on which health care deliveries of Africa should be based. Significantly, it is to be understood that there are various treatment procedures which modern medicine can learn from indigenous practitioners. Further research would then combine to take the health care delivery to loftier heights. For example, in Oruljebu in Ogun State, there is an indigenous orthopedic practice that is famous in Nigeria, where

people whose cases may have been rejected as beyond repair at Igbobi are treated. It is our obligation as academics and policy makers to ensure that this knowledge does not die, and that it is incorporated into the training curricular of our contemporary medical education. The advantage is that we would be able to see how better to improve on these practices where we thing there is not to so do.

On a different note, the use of resources available to make medicines must be taken seriously and where necessary regulated. A situation whereby United States of America allows states within its borders to grow and research in ganja but stymie the development of medical ganja in countries such as Jamaica must be seriously resisted. But the reason why such leverage works is because societies which live above their means cannot resist unnecessary intrusions in the policy formulation and implementation that take place within its borders. This critical issue must be addressed.

Pharmacology and Pharmaceutics

When the Europeans appeared in tropical Africa in the middle of the last millennium firmly set in the desire to pillage the resources of foreign lands to build their sparsely resourced subcontinent, one of the issues that confronted them was malaria. And until they found that the indigenous people were already able to protect and treat themselves with quinine their tenancy was fortunately restricted. Combined with various other tropical diseases which their later discovery of penicillin immunized them against, tropical Africa was protected from the predatory incursions from Europe.

Now, Europeans would wish to make it seem that it was their discovery of quinine and penicillin that saved the tropical Africans who had lived in their homes in the forests for that long from imminent decimation as occurred with the bubonic plague in Europe. This narrative is flawed and irresponsible in the extreme, because the various plants and medicaments for the natural protection and treatment of the indigenous populations were already being harnessed and utilized with success to ensure that the tropical region of Africa was one of the densest populated part of the world. This is what accounts for Nigeria being the most populous country in Africa and the central Africa having such dense populations as is witnessed in Rwanda.

What is obvious from the above, and which contemporary pharmacology and pharmaceutics are demonstrating is that nature has enough resources for combating whatever ailments nature may throw at inhabitants of the various regions of the world, and the inhabitants of these regions are not so intellectually challenged as not to be able to observe what the lower animals do to survive and emulate them. In fact, the wealth of resources which abound in Africa make it one of the richest in indigenous knowledge in treating congenital illnesses from obesity to diabetics, cancer and others. Our responsibility as leaders in various

domains is to begin to look inward, within our own intellectual traditions, at the indigenous knowledge systems of our ancestors, to research, develop and utilize the wealth of resources which nature has so kindly blessed out societies. This is not rocket science, it is only something that requires a shift in how we understand ourselves, our ancestry and the overall values of the knowledge systems bequeathed to us over generations by our primogenitors.

Toxicology and Synthetic Medicine

There is absolutely no doubt about the harmful effects of the many procedures and treatments in Allopathic modern medical practice. In fact, the history of the early beginnings of this practice and the foundations on which it was built speak clearly to the dangers this medical practice has posed to humans in the form of damage to organs, possible shut down of the body, destruction of the nervous system, etc. The issue is that the process of synthesizing the active agents in the drugs, as well as the preservatives and other compounds that are added are largely injurious to health. It is like having migraine and taking a cure that will lead to internal bleeding, or having arthritis and taking a medication that can lead to heart attack or cancer. However, indigenous societies have knowledge of various conditions and cures which are cellularly compliant and physiologically biodegradable, being properly digestible and extruded from the system without any harmful residue when taken in proper dosage. But because such knowledge have been denied, destroyed and/or appropriated by Western academy, the ownership has changed or become dormant. It is this which calls for rectification and validation through serious research and development of the indigenous knowledge systems and property rights of peoples of African descent.

Where the research needs to be located is in the identification of the active agents in these plants, which would then facilitate the proper determination of dosage as well as length of use before cure is attained. The success of the pernicious Western and Arabian concerted epistemicide on the intellectual traditions of peoples of African descent has led to the belief even among our own intelligentsia that Africa was an intellectual tabular rasa, which must now be fed by ideas, knowledge, metaphysics and axiology from totally different and alien cultural and climatic traditions. The result is the dissonance that is obvious in virtually all aspects of life of peoples of African descent. There is no doubt that the learning curve has been horrendous and lengthy, thereby leading to the impoverishment of Africana peoples globally and the near or abject failed state status of many of our political institutions.

Let us compare the case of Ampiclox, an antibiotic which is supposed to clear infection and garlic. Its side effects include “diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, anorexia, gastritis, abdominal cramps”, etc. These are compounded by seizures and other possible life threatening complications. On the other hand, there does not seem to be these side effects in the case of

garlic, a natural product. You can get a prescription for stomach ache which when you read the fine print you are told the drug is likely to kill you when you take it as prescribed.

Imagine you have joint or muscular pains and doctors attempt to alleviate your pain under Western modern medical practice, and the best they could give you is Celebrex. You are in for a shocker, because in the case of Celebrex, the situation is even worse than that of Ampiclox. Online it says of Celebrex side effects that patients should get emergency medical help if you have any of these signs of an allergic reaction to Celebrex: hives; difficulty breathing; swelling of your face, lips, tongue, or throat. Stop using Celebrex and call your doctor at once if you have a serious side effect such as: chest pain, weakness, shortness of breath, slurred speech, problems with vision or balance; black, bloody, or tarry stools; coughing up blood or vomit that looks like coffee grounds; swelling or rapid weight gain; urinating less than usual or not at all; nausea, upper stomach pain, itching, loss of appetite, dark urine, clay-colored stools, jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes); skin rash, bruising, severe tingling, numbness, pain, muscle weakness; or severe skin reaction -- fever, sore throat, swelling in your face or tongue, burning in your eyes, skin pain, followed by a red or purple skin rash that spreads (especially in the face or upper body) and causes blistering and peeling. While less serious Celebrex side effects may include: upset stomach, diarrhea, bloating, gas; dizziness, nervousness, headache; runny or stuffy nose, sore throat; or mild skin rash.

These are just two examples. Meanwhile nature has ways of dealing with these issues which indigenous people are aware of, and which are less expensive, with minimal life threatening side effects and which can easily be stopped without creating withdrawal syndrome. It is through research that these indigenous knowledge systems of/about herbs and materials can be further investigated and improved to serve humanity better.

Environmental Science and technology

Continental Africa has been fortunate not to have such natural disasters as earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc. But the effects of global warming has been in the droughts plaguing many parts of Africa and the possibility of acute water shortage in the future. To this end, Africa must begin again to utilize the age-old conservation and preservation knowledge. Mathai received the Nobel Prize for her efforts in reforestation, this effort must be redoubled against the scourge of deforestation and the creeping spread southward of the Sahara. The diversity of types of trees would indicate that these could be used to reclaim the desert spread and well as to fortify the continent from degradation.

It is clear that science and technology is the way to go for the future. But such science and the technology must be sensitive to the fragility of the ecosystem. To that extent it can better work when deployment of science and technology is to prevent invasive and corrosive

use of the resources of the continent. Attention must be paid to issues of renewal, sustainability and regeneration.

The major element for development is awareness of natural environment and the resource endowments that comes with it. In Nigeria many young people were taught in the past that Mungo Park discovered River Niger. This ludicrous monstrosity of unimaginable proportions never struck our brainwashed teachers as anathema, because it would suggest that the inhabitants of the paths of the flow of the Niger and the Benue never knew such rivers flowed in their regions, and when they used it for transportation, commerce and livelihood, it never dawned on them they were indeed harnessing the natural endowment of the rivers. What this suggests is the weakness of the received educational paradigms, and how emasculating it has been for the development of African societies. On the contrary, it is being suggested that Africa now has a responsibility to part ways with dependency syndrome, which has determined that the only resources used are those which are sanctioned by the erstwhile European overlords.

Let me illustrate. In Botswana at a certain period in the year, the heat reaches to 50° Celsius. This heat and the attendant impact can be harnessed to generate energy to power the region if investments are made in research and development, utilizing the ever present sun. Even more important is the fact that most of Africa is awash with natural sunlight throughout the year. Why should we depend on fossil oils to power our development? This is the challenge which must be met, in order to wean our societies from the external determination of our developmental capacity.

Alternative energy solutions must be found to power Africa to greatness. This is not rocket science, and the existence of various resources all over Africa shows there should be no African country that does not have adequate power supply. Such power must be renewable and cheap. Africa is bounded by the Atlantic to the West and Indian to the East, and the sunlight that washes the continent on a daily basis should be harnessed to generate energy. Even more critical is the need for good governance in the continent.

On this note, it is important that the divisive, acrimonious and wasteful party democracies must be domesticated to reduce the current violence that attends elections. Indigenous democratic cultures all over Africa must be subjected to research. The Kgotla in Botswana is an example of various structures and institutions which protected the people from tyranny and dictatorship. These are replicated in various African communities.

Individual and Public Health

In the past decades many diseases have been identified because of the advances in technology. The recent Ebola outbreak in three countries in West Africa show clearly the vulnerability of African communities to health threats. While it is hard not to pay attention to conspiracy theories, one cannot be unmindful of the involvement of foreign agencies in the three countries in which the ravages of the outbreak have been most destructive.

While it is significant that the migration of one man from the affected region nearly wrecked unimaginable havoc on the most populous mega city in West Africa, Lagos, it is to the credit of alert doctors that the threat was curtailed. One would suggest that an institute in epidemiology should be set up in memory of the consultant doctor and the nurse who were the heroines of the salvation of Lagos and Nigeria from the infestation of Ebola. This is not too much to ask, and the fact that AU has been setting up centres of excellence shows an appreciation of the need for research and development at the continental level.

There are a number of things that can be done. But these must be coordinated in order to have the result that would allow Africa to have sustainable development. In the area of health, the architecture of the built environment must be sensitive to the ecologies of the regions. A situation whereby buildings are seen in Europe and Asia and transplanted without domestication to various African communities is neither energy-efficient nor conducive to individual and community health advancement. To this end it is the responsibility of indigenous knowledge centres to facilitate the research into various practices in various African communities whereby the lived environment are constructed reflective of the best practices in alignment with nature.

There is no doubt that the cities which sprang up over various African communities before European civilization emerged and started “discovery” journeys around the world had knowledge of how best to deal with individual and community health issues. The hygiene and education coordination was responsible for the flourish of these cities even at those ages in African civilization. While today those committed to the destruction of African intellectual heritage are busy singing about the pre-literate and pre-scientific societies around the world, classifying Africa within that category, it must be remembered that the Nile was dammed by African civilizations, that cesarean section was performed, neurological surgeries were not alien to African communities, and mummification of the dead was practiced.

When one bears in mind that it was through Africa that science, mathematics and technology reached a Europe that was way behind humanity in all aspects of existence that the same Africa is now being allowed to be misled by late comers to civilization is a curious development. And there is no better way to begin the reclaiming of the African glorious past

than through research into indigenous knowledge systems of Africa for adaptation for contemporary advancement of human existence on the continent.

There is no doubt that Western modern medicine in its current format, in spite of the gargantuan steps it has made in diagnostic and treatment regimens, and is not either environmentally or physiologically friendly to nature or human inhabitants of society. Education is a key component in keeping people healthy and also to assure that preventive steps can be taken to keep populations healthy and productive to realize the optimum development capacity in these societies. This is the next issue that is addressed.

Education beyond Certification

The development of humanities education, based on foreign conceptions of humanity, society, culture, economics, security, conflict management and resolution, religion and family orientation, among others, is very misguided. When UNESCO identified the near century failure of the faculties of education in Africa to produce teachers who would lead the challenge of national and continental development, it was a signal annotation of the mindless following of foreign ideology that must be blamed on the weakness of our intellectual preparation of national and continental challenges. All societies of the world keen on transformation begin the process through a sense of nationalism, patriotism and identity development which create the trust capital between the leadership and followership. Fukuyama's discussion may be regarded as ultra-rightist by many, but the fact that many African societies have not been able to translate huge resources to development, on account of the leadership failure which in primitive accumulative greed only promote myopic self-interest is the alienative nature of relationship between the governed and the leaders. Even more curious is the fact that members of the leadership cadre have continued to use styles of leadership inherited from colonial system, which operated on the basis of domination of the colonized. And to compound the situation, the leadership is not ashamed to send their own children to foreign educational institutions after starving to destruction local ones, seek medical attention in foreign countries when local ones have been reduced to mere consulting rooms or invest so much of stolen national resources in the development of patches of desolate arid wilderness in the Arabian desert known as Dubai or Doha!

The analysis we have engaged calls for serious scholars to come together, first and foremost to have a retreat or workshop, one dedicated to pondering how the parlous situation of the humanities in Nigeria and indeed the whole of the African world can be redressed. There is no time to waste as, regardless of how much resources a society has, if there is no enlightened and committed leadership strata to drive the process of development, such development will simply not happen. African scholars must begin to recognize the wealth of knowledge which our ancestors developed, and by so doing begin the investigative and

reflective engagement that will help us to generate homegrown foundations for Africana development. Even more serious is the fact that Africa needs to encourage the intellectual capital it has locally and extra-continentially to collaborate in the development of processes and mechanisms for extricating Africa from the crunching poverty and disease which afflicts the masses of its people.

But to take the suggested steps above, Africana scholars must lead the way in discarding the disrespectful disdain, contempt and embarrassing disconnectedness which currently lead them to snigger at the intellectual foundations of their ancestral survival. They must see the parallel between the foreign and local/indigenous metaphysics of religion, ethics, science, social science and psychology, among others, in order to be able to use the indigenous knowledge systems as propelling launch-pads for greatness. The religiously brainwashed, the intellectually narrow-minded and diminutive attitudes of our academics which suggest there is nothing in their own ancestry worth quoting or researching must change. This interdisciplinary task must start with the humanities, and then extend to the pure or applied physical sciences, the technologies and applied technologies of nuclear, aeronautics, mathematics, medicine, etc.

In the Caribbean and at the University of the West Indies, a number of steps must be taken immediately to begin the process of liberating the humanities. It is sad that we teach and expect our students to graduate and become reflective individuals and functionaries of society when we do not provide them with the intellectual tools to carry out such reflective engagement. That the University of the West Indies has existed for almost a century and had no Philosophy Department that is autonomous is a disaster of unimaginable proportions. The way in which everything we do at the University has been shortchanged cannot be fully comprehended unless we look at the cadre of divisive, clannish, tribalist and destructive leadership which this University provides for Jamaica. A full-fledged Department of Philosophy will house or provide space for Centre for Ethics, teaching of Critical Thinking, Environmental Ethics, Sport and Law Enforcement Ethics among others. It will provide space for the development of robust interrogation of issues relating to governance, professional, educational and other aspects of what we do in the academy and its effect on society and humanity at large.

When it is stated that the 21st Century is a knowledge society it does not mean that every society will participate. Some will be consumers whose only contribution is to take the microphone and shout inanities into it for feckless youth to jump up and down senselessly in the name of music. Yet some societies will go to Mars and determine how to avoid disasters of all kinds given the knowledge generated. How does one contemplate the situation in which Global Africa has no think tank devoted to research in indigenous knowledge systems relating to society, pharmacology, environment, law, justice, education, etc? Why is it that the University of the West Indies cannot find space to recognize global African stalwarts in the diverse fields of human existence? Why are we so bent on micro-managing poverty and

weakness in the name of our narrow conception of power – hugging up the little offices we occupy to the point where we forget that someone was in the office before us and someone will be there after us? Why is it so difficult for UWI to garner the good will of its past students in any appreciable way, such that there are no edifices to commemorate their successes and memories? Could it be that our culture of plantocracy is so alienating that our past students do not even want to be associated with us? Could there be some epistemological gap in the process – arrogance, posturing in emptiness or absence of depth which enforces a non-existent distance between faculty and student?

As someone who has always lived away from home from very early, I have learnt that one must live within one's means. Could a better Humanities Education teach our students, for their own sake and for their children's that there is virtue in modesty – and cultivate a philosophy of leadership and followership that will be capable of standing the challenges of external shocks and internal schisms? Could UWI begin the process of building the humanity for the future in the Caribbean, rather than business as usual, whereby the graduates of UWI constitute the predators who manipulate, cheat and oppress to attain power and to maintain same?

Nigeria has been in the season of anomie for a long time as Soyinka would aver. I was thinking that the elections would have started and the liberation of the masses would have begun, but the old saying that corruption will fight back seem to be immutable. What is being urged here is not to be interpreted as an empire quest, which is too late in the day, as this student of Philosophy understands transience and appreciates terminality of contracts based on retirement requirements. It is my considered view that a properly structured Humanities academy at University of the West Indies, Mona Campus will have the capacity to engage leadership in reflective and reflexive engagement of governance – especially in philosophy of leadership, philosophy of culture, philosophy of governance, etc. I suggested many years ago that leadership cannot be a hit or miss matter, because human nature is too volatile to be left to chance. A Department of Philosophy could be combined with a Strategic Studies Institute to provide the leadership workshops, retreats, briefing and seminars for new executives, ministers, parliamentarians and leaders of NGOs. This has the advantage of preventing the kind of impasse generated by the regime of sex education material introduced into homes of wards of the state in Jamaica last year, and it would prevent the possibility or recurrence of the Dudus Saga which seemed to have had a warped conception of how official Washington operates – America has no permanent friends, but permanent interests. In the life of a people and a country it is never too late to begin the process of putting in place lasting and concrete traditions which will help to consolidate on the good and reduce the undesirables.

Conclusion

As we engage humanity and globalization, Africa has a duty to its posterity. Securing the knowledge systems, patents, copyrights and proprietary control over African indigenous knowledge and traditions is critical to ownership and benefits therefrom. Currently this is not the case for the reasons enunciated in this discussion, but the overall objective should be moving toward adaptation of such traditions to guide in the proper determination of the paths to African development. Our scholars must invest in research, our businesses and governments must support the research and the commercialization of these ideas must benefit Africa.

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