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AFRICA: FAST-FORWARDING INTO THE FUTURE

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As the globe's second largest and second most populous continent, Africa daily negotiates a gauntlet as it wrestles with multiple images of its future prospects. It is perilously poised on the tightrope between grandiose 'African Renaissance' rhetoric on the one side and excessive Afro-pessimism on the other. At the epicentre of this fault line lays the debate around what and who is 'Africa,' a continent of 53 disparate nations, multiple ethnicities, over 1,500 diverse languages and an export of millions repatriated in diaspora. Swirling around overhead are conflicts related to whose narratives will dominate 'African' history and who will appropriate the power to create the templates for its future.

Indeed the task at hand is one of discovering and maximizing those particular skill-sets and strategic advantages that Africa can leverage to engage with the challenges of kick-starting its destiny in the 21st century. But beyond its mandate to actively engage with curing its own ills, there lays a bigger objective, and that is for the peoples of this resourceful continent to capitalize on their unique contributions to the global arena. Moreover precisely at this time in the story of our planet, there is a dire need for the distinctive gifts and voices that Africans can bring to the world stage; proclivities that emanate precisely from the connectivities between Africa's past, its present and its future.

The Past: The Unexpected Pay-offs of 'Double Consciousness'

What is certain, is that Africans (whether locally, in exile, or those repatriated to other locations) offer a unique matrix of diverse and under-represented outlooks and competencies to the global equation. The clinching character of these perspectives has oft been forged in the kiln of what Phillip Brian Harper calls experiences of 'marginality.' This is a distinctive theme that resonates amongst much of the contemporary literature on culture and identity in the postcolonial era. As African American Yale

sociologist Paul Gilroy points out, collective experiences of subjugation tend to centralise a common womb of ‘subaltern knowledge’ that births counter-hegemonic ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

Latin American scholar Walter Mignolo calls this phenomenon the presence of ‘border thinking’ amongst postcolonial people of colour. He uses the term ‘border’ in two ways. First he explains ‘border thinking’ as a type of ‘post-occidental reason.’ Secondly he explains (within the context of America’s southern boundaries) what border *locations* signify: in physical terms borders symbolize *exteriority*. In effect, what these scholars are suggesting is that due to frequent experiences of structural inequity and disenfranchisement, many Africans are able to intuitively tap into ‘border’ ways of thinking and being. It has been precisely this ‘border’ experience that has opened the door for many African peoples to see and think from both *within* as well as *outside* of western ‘Empire’ mindsets.

In his classic *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha speaks of the postcolonial identity as birthing mindsets that embody ‘hybridity,’ echoing what the black American forefather W.E.B. Du Bois once called ‘double consciousness.’ This ability to think outside and beyond traditional binary and dualistic thinking amounts to a very particularist skillset that is key to the future and is a singular gem being offered by some of our African colleagues and global family members. It in fact represents one of the pivotal qualities commending Africans to a postmodern world. Gilroy suggests this gift serves as an antidote or even ‘counterculture’ to the harshly structured industrial paradigms of modernity. He posits that it positively predisposes these persons of colour with a distinctive advantage as they launch into an era of increasing global amalgamation.

The Present: Networking within Labyrinths

Another pivotal 21st century skill that has been superbly matured within many African contexts is *networking* – the ability to collectively, and frequently informally, coalesce around mutually beneficial outcomes. What this particular brand of networking requires is a complex knowledge of how the totality of the whole relational system fits together and thereby how various component parts can conjoin their interests.

Whilst stereotypical (and essentialist) characterizations of the African continent point to the ‘communal’ aspects of its social makeup, it is important to draw attention to what James C. Scott calls the ‘hidden transcripts’ that configure social realities. The story behind the story is that there have been specific factors at play in shaping ‘African’ conceptions of the networked community. What needs to be increasingly unveiled is the antecedent history that informs why networking has become a survival *modus operandi* for many of the sons and daughters of the African land.

In his fascinating book entitled *Citizen and Subject*, Mahmood Mamdani outlines the process whereby colonial powers put into place a system that essentially fostered the growth of a small African elite which was co-opted to serve imperial interests. In this way colonial powers were able to perpetuate a system of indirect rule which followed a pattern of ‘decentralized despotism.’ Due to the abuses inherent to this ‘divide and conquer’ strategy, one of the most salient legacies embedding itself deeply into the psyche of this continent is a profound mistrust (and ambivalence) towards the Western-style institutional authority systems of that day. These structures, though feigning democratic ideals, essentially entrenched a schema of abusive leadership; what Alec Russell calls the phenomenon of ‘Big Men’ (and ‘little people’) across the continent.

Moreover the continent’s challenge, facing scores of on-the-ground Africans half a century after colonial rule, is still the fight to circumvent frequently inept ‘Big Men’ and to offset the excesses of corrupt African (and Western/transnational) elites. This task has been undertaken primarily in two veins

on the continent. The one route has been through strategies of ‘nepotism’ whereby assets are stretched out amongst the broader network of a powerful person’s family, friends and cohorts. (This is very different than in the West where assets are viewed frequently as individual wealth.)

The second survival strategy for the continent’s poor and un-connected has been to form informal and non-institutional *alternative networks* of sustenance. This is evidenced all across Africa, from the amazing ingenuity of Bulawayo’s ‘black market’ to the ‘street’ entrepreneurship exhibited on the sidewalks of Abuja, Kinshasa and Dar es Salaam. In their text entitled *Africa Works*, Chabal and Deloz call this the ‘informalization’ of African economics. William Reno, in his ground-breaking work on Sierra Leone, puts a spot-light on this phenomenon, examining the role and profusion of these informal markets and suggesting that their commercial power and influence situates them as an alternative to failing State authorities. African informal networks therefore become a ‘shadow State,’ effectively reaching all sectors and strata in a labyrinth of alternative points of connection.

The de-institutionalization of Africa’s economic entry and exit points has marked the birthplace for a plethora of non-formal networking skills and modalities. This has imbued many of the continent’s citizens with the uncanny ability to form new networks of community in whatever circumstances they might find themselves. Understanding and utilizing interconnectivities, and capitalizing on the matrix of formal as well as informal webs of relationship, are skills on high demand in the new millennium. Many Africans seem to be ahead of the West in this regard, having intuitively sensed long ago that the days of solo cowboys and lone rangers are over.

The Future: Leap-Frogging into the New Millennium

Catch-up time is at a premium in Africa. From the frenetic streets of Johannesburg to the bustling alleyways of Dakar, time is standing still for no one. What is starkly evident is that people’s ability to adapt to new ways and newer-still technologies is highly developed. But the reason for elevating this point to our attention is this: while Europe, America, and most northern hemisphere countries went through a century-long process of increasing mechanisation and development (the *Industrial Revolution*) Africa has never gone through a concerted and uniform ‘industrial conversion’ of that magnitude or duration.

What this means is that many Africans, by default, have needed to learn technological ‘leap-frogging’ skills. The common theme threaded between the squatter shacks of Nairobi and the mud huts of Luanda, is that most residents will have some connection or intermittent access to cell phone usage. Whether through a friend, relative or neighbour, through honest or dishonest means, cell phones are spreading across the continent like wildfire. Totally bypassing and ‘leap-frogging’ over the older and more infrastructure intensive land-line technologies, the latest and newest mechanisms are sported in Africa, and seemingly, without a look backwards.

This is not to say that there are not serious questions about the wisdom or viability of advancing newer technologies in environments that lack the infrastructural backbone to support them. This may be precisely why even countries such as South Africa, which prides itself with the claim of being one of the few African countries with pervasive first world amenities, still has major hiccups in its infrastructure and service provision track record. Invariably, however, the message is the same – adapt or become extinct.

In his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida cites numerous business scenarios that illustrate the need for *leap-frog adaptability* as a critical new millennial skill. Many African peoples find themselves in an environment 24-7 where this is a mandatory competence and reality for them. Moreover having to exercise this aptitude all the more rigorously provides them with the opportunity for a head-start on leveraging the leap-frog mindset as an expertise.

Thrusting itself headlong into the rushing waves of momentous global change has left Africa feeling somewhat damp and shy in the ocean depths. It has also, however, offered her the prospect of showcasing her own lithe beauty and offerings on the global catwalks of opportunity. Standing at the threshold of what Grant Farred calls the ‘crossroads of postcoloniality and postmodernity,’ Africans have the chance to enter center stage exhibiting their predispositions and unique giftings; showcasing the benefits of hybridity, the strengths of networking, and the tenacity of a leap-frog mentality. Ann El Khoury refers to this opportunity as the shift from an ‘oppositional’ to a ‘propositional’ mindset, and it will make all the difference as Africans actively create their own provocative futurereviews.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *As Africa plays an increasing role in world commerce and geopolitics, how will the double consciousness (the ability to think outside traditional boundaries) impact world politics and religion, much of which is based on a binary, dualistic “us-them” mindset?*
- *How will the two survival strategies (for the poor and unconnected) as discussed in this article impact institutional authority in Africa? Will it have a similar impact elsewhere, and why or why not?*
- *How will the double-consciousness, perhaps in conjunction with the holistic view within much of Asia, impact the counterpoint-based sense of identity that is so pervasive in the West – “You know who you are because of people who are not like you?”*
- *How will the African concept of networking impact geopolitics and conflict resolution – and for that matter, future studies? To what extent will it become more prevalent on other continents by 2018?*
- *Excluding Antarctica, Africa is the only continent that (in the views of some, such as noted geographer Hans Blij) lacks a single dominant nation or alliance. Do you foresee a dominant nation or alliance emerging in Africa by 2015?*
- *Will “nepotism” as practiced in Africa become more commonplace in other parts of the world as various forces change the family? Will wealth be viewed as individual or as tribal in more parts of the world by 2020? (Recall that Native Americans had no private land.)*
- *The nation-state is losing ground to multinational corporations and other non-state actors. Will the “shadow state” in Africa also contribute to the demise of the nation-state?*
- *How will citizen networks in Africa inspire a new sense of community in other parts of the world? What will be the impact on traditional tribal cultures in Africa?*
- *Is 24x7 the wave of the future worldwide, and does it herald a complete disconnection from nature? Why or why not – and if not, what will reverse the present trend toward 24x7? And,*

which region of the world is the last bastion for those who don't want a 24x7 society and the resulting disconnection from nature?

- *The article states, "Invariably, ... the message is the same – adapt or become extinct." Worldwide, what or who is the "independent variable" to which others must adapt – e.g., technology, Western business culture, etc. – and who are the "dependent variables" ("adaptees")?*