

What is to be done about the dawn of the African Century by Dapo Ladimeji

As the new millennium dawns a picture is shown on the TV screen of Nelson Mandela lighting a candle in his former prison cell on Robben Island and passing this to Thabo Mbeki who then passes it onto a young child - from generation to generation. Mandela has spoken of the dawn of the African Century. What does this mean? What is its significance?

One way to understand this moment is to first go back 100 years and then go back 1000 years.

100 years ago

In 1900 Africa had been subject to the devastation commonly known as "the scramble for Africa". What lay behind this was not cultural or psychological inferiority but technological isolation. The emergence of new technologies to which Africa had no access sealed her fate. The invention of automatic weapons, specifically the Gatling gun, turned the balance of power decisively against Africa. European powers fully understood the significance of the new technologies. They held a conference specifically to agree among themselves that no one should allow this technology to come into African hands. Having agreed upon that, they then held another conference to parcel out Africa. Like steps in a logical argument one step led to the next, inevitably.

But how did we come to a situation where Europeans could decide to withhold the new technologies? To appreciate this fully one needs to go back 1,000 years.

1000 years ago

A thousand years earlier the Islamic/Arab culture was the most advanced in the 'western world'. African universities and African scholars were part of this Islamic culture and shared a general cultural superiority over most of Europe. This was pre-renaissance Europe.

Much of the Arab commercial and cultural superiority arose out of the strict blockade they imposed on Europe. Access to the rest of the world was on Arab terms and those terms led to backwardness and relative poverty in Europe. European powers poured great effort and expense to break the Arab blockade. The so-called voyages of discovery were blockade-busting excursions. At the same time as the Europeans were seeking to break their blockade, Africa's relationship with the Arab world had deteriorated so much that it was no longer an integral part of Islamic culture but was itself subject to the Arab blockade. This was a blockade from the North.

The great disaster that followed was that the very success of the European blockade busting excursions completed the encirclement of Africa by adding a blockade from the South - the Europeans controlled the sea. The cultural and commercial effects of the Arab blockade on Europe were visited upon Africa with a vengeance - cultural, commercial and technological stagnation on a continental scale. (See note 2).

One can exaggerate the effects of slavery on Africa if one sees it as a cause not one of the terrible consequences of stagnation caused by the blockade. (Walter Rodney's work see note 1.) Remember - during the period of the Arab blockade Europeans were busy selling 'white' people to Arabs. That is where Europeans learnt the arts of slaving. (In the story Robinson Crusoe was first sold as a white slave to the Arabs.) That is where the riches of Venice grew. But Africa produced no Venice because the relative power positions were so unequal.

If isolation induced by the Arab and European blockades caused Africa's downfall what were the

causes of the partial liberation in the last century? The answer to this question is of great importance. Europe's blockade of Africa was broken by the Russian Revolution of 1917. This Revolution produced a European country that had new technologies and had an interest, i.e. its own survival, in spreading that technology around the "oppressed people" of the world. It was the Russian Revolution that made new technologies (modern weapons) available to the Liberation Movements.

What can be learnt from the past? That African and Black communities around the globe should never again allow themselves to be blockaded, to be separated from new developments in technology or commerce.

Having looked back first a hundred years then a thousand years, we must now return to the present. What do we find there now? Gone is the Soviet Union! New technologies are emerging at a sensational pace. Africa is not a full member of this technological movement. The basic brickwork is there for a repeat of the past. This time it must not be so.

All current projections for the development of new technologies on a global scale have a nil entry for Africa. As for the Black communities within the western world there is even a new term - the digital divide - to express their disenfranchisement from the new technologies.

Steps for the Future

On the positive side Europe no longer has any kind of monopoly on the new technologies. America leads followed by Japan and Europe, but the Asian tigers are not far behind. Alliances and partnerships must be established with as many of these parties as possible. (In this respect Noah Samara is certainly showing the way.)

On the level of national governments, African countries must declare an EMERGENCY. The educational systems must be uprooted and replanted firmly into the world of new technologies. New technology zones/parks must be established with appropriate infrastructure. Done on a limited local scale the resources are not impossible to find. New investment should only be accepted if it demonstrates the adoption of new technologies. Our faces should be set against the well-meaning advisers who suggest the use of less challenging technologies. Those nice liberal friends of Africa who recommend that we should adopt low-level technologies in order to develop 'gradually' should be politely told to "drop dead". If this conjures up images of a forced march into the future - that is correct. Care should be taken to learn from the errors of Soviet and Chinese forced marches - centralized direction is possibly suicidal or genocidal. The centre, the government, is responsible for infrastructure, for educational system and other public goods. New enterprises need to be unfettered by controls, disciplined by markets and exported orientated. (See Note 3.)

On the level of community, particularly the Black communities in the "western world" a major political issue must be made of the need for funding to obliterate the digital divide, government action to overcome discrimination and any other obstacles to Black people accessing the new technologies. This is because new technologies are accessed firstly through the educational system (schools and universities) but far more importantly through private enterprises and research institutes. Black access to these latter entities in the western world is minimal.

On the level of the personal and the family there is no doubt in my mind what needs to be done. Whoever you are whatever your age get connected to the Internet, learn something about biotechnology and the new telecommunications revolutions. This is a revolution happening on your doorstep - take note. For families there is no choice - tell your children that they must learn the new technologies. Only in the new technologies is there life for them. Take them to the museums and exhibitions and repeat the mantra - it is only in these new technologies that you will have a life, a future.

It is important that this should not be misunderstood. I am not suggesting that every child can

become a geneticist or a software guru. Even if your child wants to be a chat show host explain to her that the next Oprah is most likely to debut on the Internet rather than TV. If he wants to be a sportsman the future Tiger Woods or Vanessa Williams is likely to have had his or her technique analyzed by a computer that then designed a training program to eliminate the weaknesses. It is not that all jobs in the future will be in new technologies but that for those people not informed by the new technologies there will be no jobs.

Most European futurologists are predicting that Africans and Black people will eventually all pass away from poverty and disease as the new technologies pass them by. The Americans and the Europeans have followed the Darwinian motto "change or die" while advising Africa not to change too much.

Will the next century witness the final passing away of the African in particular and Black people in general, or will the next few years witness the dawn of the African century?

If African governments can declare a state of emergency, focus their nations on adopting the new technologies, on building alliances with other cultural groups to access and acquire the new technologies; if communities can via political action seek better funding and the breaking down of entry barriers and the dissolving of the digital divide; if individuals can devote themselves to acquiring the new skills and knowledge of the new technologies; if our children can become obsessed with these new technologies then we will have the dawn of the African century. All you of courage and determination, all you who are fed up with being viewed as the basket case of the world, who are tired of witnessing starving children from Africa on the TV screens, of seeing wasted lives all over our inner cities, who are fed up of the lack of respect and incessant condescension this is a call to arms.

Fanon once said that every generation has its mission - it can fulfill it or betray it. Do we want a later generation to look back at missed opportunities at the turn of the century? If not get your coat on, get your boots on and join me on the march ?..

We have no choice.

NOTES

1. Walter Rodney's work "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa" focused on slavery as an engine of underdevelopment, but this did not explain why slavery took place at that time and that place and not everywhere else. But far worse, since slavery has been abolished it left the explanation of continuing underdevelopment in difficulties and had no prognosis for action (since the cause was something in the past that no longer existed what on earth could be done other than try and make some people feel guilty?). It almost implied a version of cultural and psychological inferiority as a precondition. There were always in any case serious weaknesses in a transposition of a Latin American argument to a different continent. Trevor Phillips has produced for the UK a new interpretation that does not take into account the role of Venice or the emergence of white slavery in Scotland but seems to focus on a merely integrationist rhetoric of shared genes and mutual sorrow. There is a swing between guilt driven theory and accomodationist rhetoric. Strict rigorous analysis is overcome or ignored in favour of personal emotion and the relief of alienation and angst.
2. How can one be so sure of the effects of a blockade? Because economists have studied the effects for centuries. In microeconomics it goes under the name of 'monopoly'. Any economist can trot out the consequences of monopoly in his sleep - stifling of innovation, brake on technological progress, tendency to impoverish the 'recipients'. Segregation in the US South and apartheid in South Africa were two recent attempts to legislate an internal blockade against a local population. The economic and technological consequences are too well known to require repetition. Monopoly also affects academic work - the key fact that slavery for 'white' people continued in Scotland after slavery for Black people was abolished in England - a fact that makes nonsense of all 'official' histories of the anti-slavery

movement, is almost universally suppressed.

3. For those who would argue that forced marches do not work I would draw their attention to the following successful 'forced marches':
 1. the Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb
 2. Britain's industrial reorganization for European War 2 under Churchill
 3. Mao's 'long march' to safety and conquest of the Chinese Republic
 4. Kennedy's program to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade
 5. Japan's industrialization
 6. North Vietnam's mobilization to defeat foreign invaders
 7. Margaret Thatcher's renovation of the UK economy.