

Globalization Not New: Look at the Slave Trade

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The following is a keynote speech delivered by famed computer scientist Philip Emeagwali on September 18, 2004, at the Pan-African Conference on Globalization, Washington DC.

Globalization – or the ability of many people, ideas and technology to move from country to country – is not new. In Africa, it was initiated by the slave trade and given impetus by colonialism and Christian missionaries.

The early missionaries saw African culture and religion as a deadly adversary and as an evil that had to be eliminated. In 1876, a 27-year-old missionary named Mary Slessor emigrated from Scotland to spend the rest of her life in Nigeria. For her efforts in trying to convert the people of Nigeria, Mary Slessor's photograph appears on Scotland's ten pound note, and her name can be found on schools, hospitals and roads in Nigeria.

The introduction to Mary Slessor's biography, titled: "White Queen of the Cannibals" is revealing:

"On the west coast of Africa is the country of Nigeria. The chief city is Calabar," said Mother Slessor. "It is a dark country because the light of the Gospel is not shining brightly there. Black people live there. Many of these are cannibals who eat other people."

"They're bad people, aren't they, Mother?" asked little Susan.

"Yes, they are bad, because no one has told them about Jesus, the Saviour from sin, or showed them what is right and what is wrong."

These opening words clearly show that Mary Slessor came to Africa on a mission to indoctrinate us with Christian theology. She told us we worshipped an inferior god and that we belonged to an inferior race. She worked to expel what she described as "savagism" from our culture and heritage and to encourage European "civilization" to take root in Africa.

We accepted the mission schools which were established to enlighten us, without questioning the unforeseen costs of our so-called education. These mission schools plundered our children's self-esteem by teaching them that, as Africans they were inherently "bad people." Our children grew up not wanting to be citizens of Africa. Instead, their education fostered the colonial ideal that they would be better off becoming citizens of the colonizing nations.

I speak of the price Africans have paid for their education and “enlightenment” from personal experience. I was born “Chukwurah,” but my missionary schoolteachers insisted I drop my “heathen” name. The prefix “Chukwu” in my name is the Igbo word for “God.” Yet, somehow, the missionaries insisted that “Chukwurah” was a name befitting a godless pagan. The Catholic Church renamed me “Philip,” and Saint Philip became my patron and protector, replacing God, after whom I was named.

I have to argue that something more than a name has been lost. Something central to my heritage has been stripped away.

This denial of our past is the very antithesis of a good education. Our names represent not only our heritage, but connect us to our parents and past. As parents, the names we choose for our children reflect our dreams for their future and our perceptions of the treasures they represent to us.

My indoctrination went far deeper than just a name. The missionary school tried to teach me that saints make better role models than scientists. I was taught to write in a new language. As a result, I became literate in English but remain illiterate in Igbo – my native tongue. I learned Latin – a dead language I would never use in the modern world – because it was the official language of the Catholic Church, which owned the schools I attended.

Today, there are more French speakers in Africa than there are in France. There are more English speakers in Nigeria than there are in the United Kingdom. There are more Portuguese speakers in Mozambique than there are in Portugal.

The Organization of African Unity never approved an African language as one of its official languages. We won the battle of decolonizing our continent, but we lost the war on decolonizing our minds.

Many acknowledge that globalization shapes the future, but few acknowledge that it shaped history, or at least the world’s perception of it. Fewer acknowledge that globalization is a two-way street.

Africa was a colony, but it is also a key contributor to many other cultures, and the cornerstone of today’s society. The world’s views tend to overshadow and dismiss the value and aspirations of colonized people. Again, I must impart my own experiences to illustrate this point.

I grew up serving as an altar boy to an Irish priest. I wanted to become a priest, but ended up becoming a scientist. Religion is based on faith, while science is based on fact and reason – and science is neutral to race. Unfortunately, scientists are not neutral to race.

Take, for example, the origin of AIDS, an international disease. According to scientific records, the first person to die from AIDS was a 25-year-old sailor named David Carr, of Manchester, England. Carr died on August 31, 1959, and because the disease that killed him was then unknown, his tissue samples were saved for future analysis.

The “unknown disease” that killed David Carr was reported in *The Lancet* on October 29, 1960. On July 7, 1990, *The Lancet* retested those old tissue samples taken from David Carr and reconfirmed that he had died of AIDS. Based upon scientific reason, researchers should have deduced that AIDS originated in England, and that David Carr sailed to Africa where he spread the AIDS virus. Instead, the white scientific community condemned the British

authors of those revealing articles for daring to propose that an Englishman was the first known AIDS patient.

If these scientists were neutral to race, their data should have led them to the conclusion that Patient Zero lived in England. If these scientists were neutral to race, they should have concluded that AIDS had spread from England to Africa, to Asia, and to America. Instead, they proposed the theory that AIDS originated in Africa.

Even history has degraded our African roots. We come to the United States and learn a history filtered through the eyes of white historians. And we learn history filtered through the eyes of Hollywood movie producers.

Some of us complained that Hollywood is sending its distorted message around this globalized world. Some of us complained that Hollywood is a cultural propaganda machine used to advance white supremacy.

George Bush understood Hollywood was a propaganda machine that could be used in his war against terrorism. Shortly after the 9/11 bombing of New York City, Bush invited Hollywood moguls to the White House and solicited their support in his war against terrorism.

Some will even argue that schools play a significant role as federal indoctrination centers used to convince children during their formative years that whites are superior to other races. Fela Kuti, who detested indoctrination, titled one of his musical albums: "Teacher Don't Teach Me Nonsense."

It scares me that an entire generation of African children is growing up brainwashed by Hollywood's interpretation and promotion of American heroes. Our children are growing up idolizing American heroes with whom they cannot personally identify.

We need to tell our children our own stories from our own perspective. We need to decolonize our thinking and examine the underlying truths in more than just movies. We need to apply the same principles to history and science, as depicted in textbooks.

Look at African science stories that were retold by European historians; they were re-centered around Europe. The earliest pioneers of science lived in Africa, but European historians relocated them to Greece.

Science and technology are gifts ancient Africa gave to our modern world. Yet, our history and science textbooks, for example, have ignored the contributions of Imhotep, the father of medicine and designer of one of the ancient pyramids.

The word "science" is derived from the Latin word "scientia" or "possession of knowledge." We know, however, that knowledge is not the exclusive preserve of one race, but of all races. By definition, knowledge is the totality of what is known to humanity. Knowledge is a body of information and truth, and the set of principles acquired by mankind over the ages.

Knowledge is akin to a quilt, the latter consisting of several layers held together by stitched designs and comprising patches of many colors. The oldest patch on the quilt of science belongs to the African named Imhotep. He was the world's first recorded scientist, according to the prolific American science writer Isaac Asimov.

The oldest patch on the quilt of mathematics belongs to another African named Ahmes. Isaac Asimov also credited Ahmes as being the world's first author of a mathematics textbook. Therefore, a study of history of science is an effort to stitch together a quilt that has life, texture and color. African historians must insert the patches of information omitted from books written by European historians.

There are many examples of the mark Africans have made on world history. Americans are surprised when I tell them Africans built both Washington's White House and Capitol. According to the US Treasury Department, 450 of the 650 workers who built the White House and the Capitol were African slaves. Because the White House and Capitol are the two most visible symbols of American democracy, it is important to inform all schoolchildren in our globalized world that these institutions are the results of the sweat and toil of mostly African workers. This must also be an acknowledgement of the debt America owes Africa.

Similarly, discussions of globalization should credit those Africans who left the continent and helped build other nations throughout the world – most nations on Earth. Africans who have made contributions in Australia, in Russia, and in Europe must be acknowledged so our children can have heroes with African roots – so they can know their own roots and be proud of them.

The enormous contributions of Africans to the development and progress of other nations has gone unacknowledged. We have yet to acknowledge, for example, that St. Augustine, who wrote the greatest spiritual autobiography of all time, called "Confessions of St. Augustine," was an African; that three Africans became pope; that Africans have lived in Europe since the time of the Roman Empire; that Septimus Severus, an Emperor of Rome, was an African; and that the reason Beethoven was called "The Black Spaniard" was because he was a mulatto of African descent.

Why are we reluctant to acknowledge the contributions and legacies of our African ancestors? We cannot inspire our children to look toward the future without first reminding them of their ancestors' contributions.

Look at the long struggle of African Australians, who recently became citizens with rights on their native continent. Africans have been living in Australia for 50,000 years. Yet, African Australians were granted Australian citizenship just 37 years ago, in 1967. According to CNN, African Australians were not recognized as human beings prior to 1967. They "were governed under flora and fauna laws." African Australians were, in essence, governed by plant and animal laws. For many years, African Australians were described as the "invisible people." In fact, the first whites to settle in Australia named it the "land empty of people."

The contributions of Africans to Russia must be reclaimed. Russia's most celebrated author, A.S.(Aleksandr Sergeyeovich) Pushkin, told us he was of African descent. Pushkin's great-grandfather was brought to Russia as a slave.

Russians proclaim Pushkin as their "national poet," the "patriarch of Russian literature" and the "Father of the Russian language." In essence, Pushkin is to Russia what Shakespeare is to Britain. Yet Africans who have read the complete works of Shakespeare are not likely to have read a single book by Pushkin.

I was asked to share today the story behind my supercomputer discovery. It would require several books to tell the whole story, but I will share a short one that I have never told

anyone.

The journey of discovery to my supercomputer was a titanic, one-man struggle. It was like climbing Mount Everest. On many occasions I felt like giving up. Because I was traumatized by the racism I had encountered in science, I maintained a self-imposed silence on the supercomputer discovery that is my claim to fame.

I will share with you a supercomputing insight that even the experts in my field did not know then and do not know now. In the 1980s, supercomputers could perform only millions of calculations per second and, therefore, their timers were designed to measure only millions of calculations per second. But I was performing billions of calculations per second and unknowingly attempting to time it with a supercomputer timer, which was designed to measure millions of calculations per second.

I assumed my timer could measure one-billionth of a second. It took me two years to realize my timer was off a thousandfold. I was operating beyond a supercomputer's limitations, but I did not know it. The supercomputer designers did not expect their timers to be used to measure calculations at that rate. I almost gave up because I could not time and reproduce my calculations which, in turn, meant I could not share them, two years earlier, with the world.

After years of research, my supercomputer's timer was the only thing stopping me from getting the recognition I deserved. I realized the timer was wrong, but I could not explain why. I spent two years mulling over why the timer was wrong.

It took two long and lonely years to discover why I could not time my calculations. My 3.1 billion calculations per second, which were then the world's fastest, were simply too fast for the supercomputer's timer. What I learned from that experience was not to quit when faced with an insurmountable obstacle - and that believing in yourself makes all the difference.

I learned to take a step backward and evaluate the options: Should I go through, above, under, or around the obstacle? Quitting, I decided, was not an option. Indeed, the old saying is true: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. Looking back, I learned that most limitations in life are self-imposed. You have to make things happen, not just watch things happen.

To succeed, you must constantly reject complacency. I learned I could set high objectives and goals and achieve them. The secret to my success is that I am constantly striving for continuous improvements in my life and that I am never satisfied with my achievements.

The myth that a genius must have above-average intelligence is just that, a myth. Geniuses are people who learn to create their own positive reinforcements when their experiments yield negative results. Perseverance is the key. My goal was to go beyond the known, to a territory no one had ever reached.

I learned that if you want success badly enough and believe in yourself, then you can attain your goals and become anything you want in life. The greatest challenge in your life is to look deep within yourself to see the greatness that is inside you, and those around you.

The history books may deprive African children of the heroes with whom they can identify, but in striving for your own goals, you can become that hero for them - and your own hero, too.

I once believed my supercomputer discovery was more important than the journey that got me there. I now understand the journey to discovery is more important than the discovery itself; that the journey also requires a belief in your own abilities.

I learned that no matter how often you fall down, or how hard you fall down, what is most important is that you rise up and continue until you reach your goal.

It's true, some heroes are never recognized, but what's important is that they recognize themselves. It is that belief in yourself, that focus, and that inner conviction that you are on the right path, that will get you through life's obstacles.

If we can give our children pride in their past, then we can show them what they can be and give them the self-respect that will make them succeed.

Emeagwali helped give birth to the supercomputer – the technology that spawned the Internet. He won the 1989 Gordon Bell Prize, which has been dubbed the “Nobel Prize of Supercomputing.”

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