

Deconstructing and Reconstructing the African's Mindset: Strategies, Platforms and Projected Impact.

It is my utmost pleasure to present this keynote speech during this year's Africa Knows conference. It is an honor to share this esteemed platform with other great scholars of Africa. I wish to extend my warmest regards to the organizers of the Africa Knows! Conference for their unwavering support for the study and understanding of the continent of Africa.

My presentation is titled, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing the African's Mindset: Strategies, Platforms and Projected Impact." My postulation here will be that there is need for a deconstruction of the mindset of the African because the foundation of knowledge construction in Africa is majorly antagonistic to his or her advancement. The reconstruction that follows will focus on objective and reality-based knowledge creation that will be founded and built on several platforms including formal, informal and non-formal education, media, governance and policy making, religion, entertainment, to mention few.

I will start by telling a story of a personal experience I had with deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge and mindsets. To tell the story, I first have to say that I owe and dedicate this keynote speech to the late Professor Sulayman Nyang of Howard University Washington D.C. who taught me while I was studying towards my doctorate at that Institution.

One day in 2009, I walked into Professor Nyang's office with a strong feeling of heaviness. My mind was weighed down with worry. At that time, I was working on my first historical fiction manuscript which was based on the story of Olaudah Equiano, the former slave who wrote a widely celebrated autobiography and led to the birth of the slave narratives genre.

I had traveled to the field to gather information and had invested hundreds of hours doing archival research across different libraries, which was where the issues that led me to Professor Nyang's office on that fateful day began.

During the course of my archival research on the manuscript which covered the fifty year period between 1750 – 1800. It became clear to me that the materials I could find were mostly written by European explorers. The language was overwhelmingly negative and derogatory of the African people they described. Reading through the materials in search of information from that era to write my manuscript left me disturbed, bordering on depression.

It was these texts that the world read and believed about Africa for so many years, but worse is that it was from the same texts that Africans were taught about themselves, for many years. These texts formed the foundations of what is being taught today. It was so depressing that I contemplated ending the research and by extension the book project I was working on. If all I got was such biased and negative narratives about the era I wanted to work on, I thought it better to walk away from all that negativity.

I entered Professor Nyang's office with that heaviness of spirit and explained my predicament. Professor Nyang looked at me with what seemed like fire in his eyes. His countenance was charged, it spoke before his voice, which said,

“Chika, you have work with what you have. If those materials

are all there are out there, then take them, deconstruct them, and try to reconstruct them to reflect your objective and unbiased view of the people of that era.”

His words washed over my soul like cold water on a parched throat. I left Professor Nyang’s office that day and went straight to the library, ready to take on the most negative, disparaging and depreciative narrative I could lay my hand on, and to work it around until I would wring it free of all traces of untruth and present the world with as much unbiased information as possible about the Africa of that era in question.

I tried my best to do that. The manuscript that came out of that exercise, *Before We Set Sail* was completed and in 2010 it was one of six shortlisted out of 250 submission made to the Penguin Publishers Award for African writing.

Beyond being able to produce that kind of manuscript from the thick pages of untruths, half-truths and biases of authors, the experience of writing *Before We Set Sail* taught me that as far knowledge construction in Africa today is concerned, there is need for a deconstruction of what has been inherited or copied and pasted unto the African’s mindset. This work has never been actively pursued in the history of the continent. And the mindset of our forebears, drenched in the negativity of the curricula and negative information about the continent has been passed down from one generation to another. This self-loathing, defeatist mindset is aggravated in the present generation by the activities of some more powerful countries, international organizations, NGOs and multinational companies from where Africa imports material and intellectual resources. Much of this imported knowledge is shallow in its understanding of the continent’s challenges and therefore can only proffer peripheral solutions that are at best, band aids on a festering sore.

Africans must become experts in the art of deconstruction and

reconstruction of knowledge. At the end of the deconstruction process, a reconstruction is to be carried that will be aimed at the generation of an entirely new way of understanding life and our lived realities as Africans, leading to an unrestrained period of advancement for the rest of the sub-region.

So, let us break things down a little bit; in the field of education, for instance, we are looking at a situation where country by country, region by region, district by district, subject by subject, curriculum by curriculum, education is reassessed to determine what is needed, what is not needed and what needs to be introduced. We need to re-examine our structure of education and determine what will work for Africa and Africans. How can knowledge be effectively transferred to the younger generation, and how may critical consciousness be built in them at a cost that is affordable to the state. Deconstructing and reconstructing formal education in Africa will require understanding of our indigenous knowledge systems, which is foundational in building the education we need at the least cost possible.

In deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge about governance systems and mechanisms in Africa, we must ask questions about the unaffordability and unworkability of the kind of democracy we inherited from the West. What does democracy mean for the African, down to the grassroots? How can we fashion democracy in ways that will ensure widespread participation considering our existing realities, including geography, social-psychological disposition, demography and economic realities, etc. The average African country might not need as many legislators as are in existence today. Also, in this digital age where many Africans now have access to the internet, might African countries not consider making their parliament a digital exercise with limited in person contacts, where professionals who are fully engaged in their careers, such as nurses, teachers, doctors, lawyers etc. become elected

officials who continue to practice their professions in their various locations but convene online for a few hours per week for the sake of governance. This will not be out of line with democracy as practiced in many parts of traditional Africa where there were no career politicians, but citizens who were farmers and pastoralists, but who were often called upon to participate actively in governance.

And finally, media. Africa's media will play a fundamental role in the efforts at a deconstruction and reconstruction of the African's mindset. But first, it will take a decolonized media to embark on that process. Remember that the media was one of the platforms used to mold the mindset of the Africans and make him to believe in his congenital inferiority to non-African ethnicities. Till date, many will argue that Africa's media is it still inclined towards focusing on the negative.

Media in Africa must be objective in balancing information. To function as a deconstruction and reconstruction platform, Africa's media must cease from copying the west in the way stories are told or not told.

In conclusion, the reconstruction of the African's mindset is all about building a generation of Africans that will dare to invent the future. A generation of Africans whose idea of progress is generated from a paradigm of respect for what is authentically African. It is these reconstructed African minds that will create new education models, governance models, business and leadership models, healing and wholeness methods that the world so desperately needs at this time.

It has been scientifically established that mindsets, like habits, are built or imbibed over time, and can be reversed, one thought, one action and one interaction at a time. Africans must now set to task at a reconstruction of their mindset from a place of distrust and disrespect for what is African to that of respect, validation and originality.

If I may borrow some words from the great Prime Minister

Patrice Lumumba of Congo, we know that Africa is neither French nor British, nor American nor Chinese nor Indian, it is African. Therefore, Africa's liberty and dignity must be expressed in the thinking, words and decisions of Africans.

I thank you for your time and attention.

Asante Sana.

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