

“We were the First!”

The “Negrocentric” Cry for Cheap Attention!!

You have probably heard proclamations by self-styled, pro-Black crusaders about how “We were the first...,” “We were the original...” and “We were the builders...!!” These are among their favorite catchphrases, which very nearly metamorphose into war cries. Such brash rhetoric is the offshoot of a curious though vibrant obsession with an overriding Black and African preeminence, the type I was introduced to when I attended the University of Wisconsin at Madison some years ago. I wasn’t ignorant of such veneration of “African culture” (whatever that is), which often entailed denouncing European colonization and its efforts at denigrating the continent’s great values. As a student of literature, the subject was reinforced in readings that predominantly paid tribute to indigenous African practices by *négritude* writers, that reassessed clashes between European and African belief systems and that scrutinized Christianity versus African traditional religions. Growing up in Nigeria, I don’t think we were that passionate about revitalizing ancestral lifestyles and ideals, and this may have partly been because their vestiges could be identified all around us. The other possible reason, even if subliminal, is the fact that we were heatedly involved in striving to access, even kill for, the colonial attributes that we so heavily detested. The evidence was everywhere: our homes, the gadgets that adorned those homes, our cars, our fashion, our educational systems, our religious preferences, our names, our technology, our infrastructure, our military, our systems of government, our constant plea for Western aid, our skin lighteners, our weddings, our foods, our pride in the English language...the list is truly endless!! The Afrocentric fervor at Wisconsin was therefore new, though fascinating, especially as I was presented with the opportunity to flaunt my Africanism notwithstanding my fair skin.

Unfortunately, my excitement was tested almost from the get-go and it was not long before my Afrocentrism began to falter. For one, there was an obvious fragmentation within the body of Black students that were supposed to be bound under one united African family. Many African Americans, notwithstanding the loud Kente-colored bags in which they carried their books, kept their distance from their foreign African brethren. The splintering could be found in other places and it was easy to recognize that among the Caribbean, African and South American students were pockets of individuals who preferred to limit the extent to which they interacted with anyone outside their improvised circles. And even within specific nations, Nigeria for instance,

were members of ethnic groups that resisted significant familiarity with members of other ethnic groups.

But I think my greatest discouragement came with the extent to which we showered ourselves with lies, half-truths and a reinvention of history. We built the pyramids in Egypt even though expert historians, archeologists, anthropologists and engineers have never come to an agreed conclusion on when these edifices were built and who built them. I started to wonder why, after building the massive pyramids, we retired to our thatched-roof, mud-wall homes. Besides, who is “we”? Assuming that Black people actually built the Egyptian pyramids, the collective “we”—all Black people—cannot take credit for this achievement, and this includes descendants of African slaves in the Americas that largely came from West and Central Africa. Also; West, East, Central and Southern Africa are principally inhabited by ethnic nationalities that built their homes and related structures with sticks, thatch and mud prior to contact with Europeans. Should these people also be taking credit for building the pyramids?

Also puzzling about my Afrocentric journey was how students that refused to advance their creative potential did not hesitate to take credit for constructing pyramids and accomplishing other monumental feats. Aside from habitually missing classes and failing to turn in assignments on time, some of them drank and danced away their wasted weekends at nightclubs. I am aware of such students because some of them took my classes, and yet they wanted to be counted among pyramid builders. Even though Wole Soyinka, a Yoruba man and fellow Nigerian, was the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, would I be justified to claim that “we” won the prize? Would it even make a difference if I were a Yoruba man like him, especially if I were something of a sugarcoated hoodlum? Incidentally, leaching off of members of our ethnic groups and nationalities remains a continued claim to fame, a principle by which “we” demand recognition for someone else’s hard-earned achievement.

Declarations of “We were the first” and “We were the original” also compelled me to rethink the basis for and consequences of such assertions. We were the original Chinese people; we were the original Egyptians; we were the original Jews; we were the first to extract metallic iron from iron ore; we were the first to perform brain surgery and we were the original inhabitants of the first civilizations—from ancient Iraq, Mesopotamia, Assyria and Persia, to Israel, Palestine, Greece and India.... Usually the proof is taken from old statues and carvings in which can be identified something “Black” or “Negroid” (even if unsubstantiated), like dark skin, thick lips, curly hair or

braided hair, as if these are features specific only to Africans and people of African descent. Sometimes the proof is in a wooden statue that has darkened over the years from exposure to the elements. I have even read claims that “we” invented and were the first to use language. Was language invented? The absurdity in this bold declaration is that no study has conclusively determined the origin of language or the first societies to use this medium of communication. Even animals are known to use language, notwithstanding the manner in which they express themselves. But where, when and how the process began has not been determined and may never be determined. With the prevalent claims of being first, I am surprised no one has insisted that the first snowman was Black.

However, let us assume that “we” were indeed the first and original; SO WHAT! Of what use is it that we were once the “first” in everything but are apparently now the “last” in most things. We were the first to establish modern civilizations but currently occupy dysfunctional societies with some of the highest rates of despotic rule; deficient economies; rundown infrastructure; poverty; conflicts; embarrassing security and flagrant corruption. All of this in the midst of vast natural resources. Someone will admonish me and point out that we are this scraggly because of what our colonizers did to us—the same colonizers that we are trying so hard to be like and to whom we shamelessly grovel and pander to, cap-in-hand, begging for foreign aid!! Were Singapore and Malaysia any less colonized than we were? Someone else will blame it all on the transatlantic slave trade, as if Westerners introduced slavery to us. At least Europeans and Americans used their slaves to build their economies. What did we use our slaves for? Then again, someone will accuse me of having my facts wrong and will argue how the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP) of many African countries show that development is taking place at a faster pace on the continent than is often acknowledged, and that the pace is actually faster than most parts of the world. Very colorful and lofty claims that add up to another classic case of fragrant human poop. How do these facts and figures translate into improving the quality of life in different countries? Of what use are GDPs and GNPs to pregnant women roaming the streets with infants strapped to their backs as they try to eke out a living from selling boiled groundnuts? Of what use are they to a child that has dropped out of school due to poverty? Of what use are they to people who have to rely on erratic electricity and water supply? Of what use are they to the homeless? Of what use are they to slum dwellers? Of what use are they to a graduate that hasn’t found employment five years after graduation? Of what use are they to people who are forced to succumb to years of autocratic rule? Applauding Africa’s GDPs, GNPs and widespread natural resources is

like celebrating the abundance of water in a home where the occupants do not have access to the resource for drinking, bathing, cooking or washing.

I like the unambiguous biblical principle that warns; without work we don't deserve to eat. It is a principle that ties in with the concept of knowing one's worth by virtue of the fruits that he or she produces—another biblical principal. In each case, the emphasis is on work and resourcefulness as steps towards growth, success, achievement and fulfillment. Bragging about being the first, the original and the initial builders of anything is, sadly, a wasteful exercise embarked on by some Africans and African descendants who choose to replace hard work and diligence with empty rhetoric that, at best, feeds into a superiority complex. This culture of supplanting action with grand words seems to be spreading and is evident in a variety of settings. Our churches are becoming arenas where we are increasingly handing over our responsibilities to a God that we expect to miraculously perform tasks that we should be performing ourselves. It is no wonder, therefore, that pastors are becoming annoyingly louder and congregations are equally becoming more frenzied and aggressive in their demands, with people rolling on the floor, screaming and performing hyperactive dances. But it doesn't end there; we are rarely accountable for things that go wrong but prefer to blame it on some divine force. When a plane falls from the sky, someone dies of an otherwise curable ailment, a student fails an exam, armed robbers attack a family, a man beats up his wife, a pastor defrauds church members or a politician successfully rigs an election, it is all “the will of God” and, sometimes, “to the glory of the Lord!”

The fact is that no one cares about Africans being the first or the original, except Africans and African descendants who achieve a false sense of importance and accomplishment from such assertions. Achievements of every kind can be found in all societies throughout history. The real test of what was once achieved is what is currently being achieved. Achievement is not realized and then abandoned for whatever reason; it is always built upon such that new innovations are constantly evolving in a society that has a culture of foresight and creativity. If Africans were the first builders, what stops us from assuming that position today? Please don't blame it on White people; the colonization and slavery mantra has since become outdated. If colonization and slavery have not stopped Black people from becoming globally-acclaimed football stars, basketball players, actors and musicians; they shouldn't stop us from running efficient governments or contributing to current hi-tech advances. Slavery didn't prevent Frederick Douglass, without formal education, from writing books that we currently study in the university. Jim Crow didn't prevent Garrett Morgan

from inventing the gas mask and first traffic signal, just as the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki have not prevented Japan from becoming a major economic power. Racism didn't prevent Barack Obama from becoming President of the US, nor did it prevent Ursula Burns from being the first Black woman to be President of Xerox Corporation. It also hasn't stopped Kenneth C. Frazier from being President, Chief Executive Officer and a member of the Board of Directors of Merck & Co., Inc. Essentially, making bold claims without backing them with substantive action is inexcusable for Black people anywhere.

It is time for Black people to discard self-adulating stories that, in many instances, cannot be authenticated. If we must speak and boast, let us use convincing language—action and tangible innovation!

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