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Rwanda: Why Are There No African Inventions?

BY SAM KEBONGO, 25 MAY 2012

OPINION

ACTUALLY, there are a lot of African inventors. A quick scan at sites such www.kumato.com will give you surprising and interesting results. So why is it that we don't know them? We know a lot about Alexander Bell, The Wright Brothers, Galileo Galilei, Montessori, Thomas Edison, the late Steve Jobs (RIP), Charles Branson and Bill Gates, but we do not have a clue about our own. It has become the norm but indeed we should be very uncomfortable. So, why is it that there are no world renowned inventions from our parts of the world going out to the rest of the world? Let us explore a bit more.

There are no inventors in Africa? This is the first reaction that everyone seems to have. A scan on the net reveals a person like the Congolese Verone Mankou (25) who has invented the designer of a touchpad called "Way-C" for which the entire design and architecture have been conceived in Congo-Brazzaville.

Then there are the Ugandan students from Makerere University's College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology, who built Uganda's first electric car (the Kiira EV) in about 30 months. The car was successfully test driven on November 1, 2011 at the Makerere University. It still is a prototype, but most parts of the two-seater were designed and built in Uganda.

Rwanda has people like Clarise Iribagiza, and her Hehe Ltd, who have developed several useful mobile phone applications, or Peterson Mwangi the Kenyan who has conceived a device that can switch on and off a car engine from an SMS command via his mobile phone, and Kelvin Macharia Kuria, a 17-year old inventor who, in 2008, made up a home-made insecticide which mystified scientists and insecticides manufacturers. The name of this insecticide is aloemexhot, and kills instantly insects like ants, cockroaches and flies. The examples are numerous and clearly lack of inventors is not the problem. Publicity and commercialization is.

The environment: Clearly work needs to be done in nurturing an environment that not only supports inventions but also proactively challenges and encourages innovation and creativity. The question is; how do systems we have in place support this? Suppose some kid showed up with a crazy idea of, say, how to make fuel from ordinary water, how would we respond? Would we support the idea to its fruition? If we did, it would be as a result of some good natured fellow in the right place, not due to systems in place. This calls for a rethink in the way we do things. We seem to have a lot of focus on how to help the disadvantaged; we need to also focus on the gifted. We need schools and other support systems for the gifted.

The mindset question: Africa's key problem is in the mindset. Mwalimu Nyerere used to call this poverty of the mind; which he rightly called the worst form of poverty. Our minds are such that we expect all solutions to come from outside the continent. We are so focused on this 'self-inflicted state of helplessness' that we don't seek and indeed spurn home-grown talents and solutions to our pressing needs. We need to re-engineer our thoughts.

Way back, way forward: Everyone knows about the pyramids of Egypt with its accompanying shaduf irrigation system on the canals at the Nile basin. A few also know about Timbuktu; the world's first university. Then there is the great Zimbabwe complete with its unique defence system. Think of the highly organised Kingdoms (talk of inventing systems) that dotted the continent from Rwanda, Burundi to Buganda, Bunyoro Kitara to Abyssinia to Lesotho and the like. Invention has always been with us; technological, system or cultural.

We should expect to have geniuses among us. They are there. Acting on this expectation, we need to put together support systems in every field to nurture the gifted among us. A good start would be a school for the gifted children. It has to be innovative and networked. It is the only way of going round the resource hurdles.

It is about time we woke up to all the opportunities around. Abre los ojos!

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