

A WARNING FROM THE DIASPORA

Recognize Your Wealth. Protect It at All Costs.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Just because we can does not mean we should.

I write this as an African living in the American diaspora, looking homeward from inside one version of the future we are being encouraged to pursue.

This is not an argument against development.

It is not an argument against technology, industry, science, modern agriculture or economic growth.

It is a warning.

Africa is being sold a future built partly upon truths that those selling them to us are themselves beginning to abandon.

We should pay attention.

Many of the societies we have been taught to regard as the finished examples of development are now confronting the consequences of the very systems we are being encouraged to reproduce: exhausted soils, disappearing biodiversity, polluted waterways, overprocessed food, depleted communities, extractive economies, overstimulated populations, and human beings increasingly estranged from the natural rhythms necessary for physical and mental well-being.

They know this.

They are spending enormous resources trying to repair it.

They speak of regenerative agriculture after generations of intensive farming.

They speak of rewilding after clearing wild landscapes.

They speak of sustainability after constructing systems dependent upon relentless extraction.

They speak of organic food after industrializing food.

They speak of mindfulness after building economies capable of occupying almost every waking moment of human attention.

They speak of work-life balance after normalizing exhaustion.

They speak of digital detoxification after placing a screen in every hand.

They speak of restoring ecosystems after discovering, often too late, that the ecosystem itself was infrastructure.

And while this reassessment is taking place, Africa is still too often being handed the earlier script:

Clear it.

Extract it.

Industrialize it.

Monetize it.

Consume it.

Call it development.

We should be very careful.

Because we may be sitting upon precisely the things much of the world is discovering it should never have destroyed.

RECOGNIZE YOUR WEALTH

Africa must learn to recognize wealth before someone else places a price upon it.

Wealth is not only money.

It is not only what has been extracted, processed, packaged, traded and entered onto a balance sheet.

There is wealth **above the ground**:

Forests.

Fertile soil.

Rivers.

Wetlands.

Grasslands.

Medicinal plants.

Seeds.

Biodiversity.

Food systems.

Human communities.

There is wealth **below the ground**:

Oil.

Gas.

Gold.

Copper.

Lithium.

Cobalt.

Iron ore.

Rare minerals and resources whose strategic importance will continue to change as technologies change.

And then there is another category of wealth—one that cannot be found simply by digging into the earth or surveying its surface.

Language.

Memory.

Culture.

Indigenous knowledge.

Social systems.

Ways of understanding nature.

Ways of raising human beings.

Ways of organizing community.

Ways of allowing land to regenerate.

Knowledge accumulated over generations whose value may not yet have been recognized by the modern marketplace.

Do not confuse what has not yet been monetized with what has no value.

That may prove to be one of the most expensive mistakes Africa can make.

LOOK OUT OF THE WINDOW

The next time you fly across Europe or America, look carefully at the land below.

From the air, much of the landscape appears as an enormous arrangement of neatly demarcated parcels: agricultural fields, roads, settlements, suburbs, factories and infrastructure.

Almost everything has been assigned a function.

We have been educated to recognize this immediately as evidence of civilization:

Order.

Efficiency.

Prosperity.

Development.

Progress.

But look again.

Much of this land has been worked and reworked continuously. Natural cycles have been interrupted to satisfy the demands of perpetual productivity.

Where soil can no longer independently sustain the level of output demanded from it, we supply external inputs so that production can continue.

There is an unsettling medical analogy here.

A human body can lose its capacity to sustain essential functions independently while machines and external interventions keep those functions going.

We understand that the continuation of function does not necessarily mean the restoration of health.

Why are we reluctant to make the same distinction when looking at land?

The fact that land continues to produce does not necessarily mean that the land is healthy.

Now look out of the window the next time you fly across parts of Africa.

You may encounter enormous expanses of irregular, apparently untamed land.

Forest.

Grass.

Bush.

Wetlands.

Fallow fields.

Vegetation growing without the geometric discipline we have learned to associate with development.

Because of how we have been educated, many of us have learned to look at such landscapes and see absence:

Primitive.

Backward.

Undeveloped.

Unproductive.

Empty.

But perhaps we have been taught to misread what is before us.

What you may actually be looking at is wealth.

Living soil.

Ecological capacity.

Biological diversity.

Water systems.

Food potential.

Medicinal knowledge.

Future resources.

Land that still possesses the capacity to regenerate itself.

The absence of industrial exploitation is not necessarily evidence of the absence of value.

Sometimes it is evidence that the value is still intact.

DO NOT DESTROY IT TO PROVE THAT YOU HAVE DEVELOPED

This is my warning to Africa.

Protect what you have.

Do not become so eager to demonstrate that you are modern that you destroy one of the greatest inheritances still in your possession.

We are custodians of this land.

It was here before us.

Our responsibility cannot simply be to determine how much value can be extracted from it during our lifetime.

We must pass it forward—to people we will never meet—as something still capable of sustaining life.

Development should not require Africa to reproduce every mistake made by societies that industrialized before us.

In fact, arriving later gives us an extraordinary advantage.

We can see what happened.

We can see what worked.

We can see what was lost.

And we can see what others are now spending enormous resources attempting to recover.

Why would we knowingly destroy today what others are spending fortunes trying to restore?

That is not progress.

That is purchasing yesterday's mistakes at tomorrow's price.

WHEN EVERYTHING MUST PRODUCE

The demands of modern capitalism make this particularly dangerous.

Imagine that you manufacture a particular idea of breakfast.

Your ambition is not merely to feed your community. Your economic model depends upon convincing hundreds of millions—perhaps billions—of people that this particular packaged breakfast represents convenience, prosperity and modern life.

Somewhere on the planet, enormous quantities of land must continuously produce the ingredients necessary to satisfy that manufactured appetite.

Land becomes industrial infrastructure.

Every available hectare is expected to justify itself through production.

Soil must work.

And work again.

And work again.

The periods during which land naturally rests, replenishes and rebuilds itself become economically inconvenient.

Rest cannot immediately be harvested.

Rest cannot be packaged.

Rest cannot be shipped.

Rest cannot easily appear as quarterly growth.

So when exhausted soil can no longer satisfy our demands naturally, we intervene.

We feed it fertilizers and other inputs.

And send it back to work.

There is something disturbingly familiar about this.

Because this is increasingly how we treat ourselves.

When exhausted, rather than questioning the demand for continuous performance, we introduce another stimulant and continue.

We have created societies uncomfortable with anything that appears to be doing nothing.

Yet nature does an enormous amount of its most important work while appearing to us to be doing nothing.

THEN WE EAT THE SYSTEM

And then we consume what this enormous industrial apparatus produces.

Food subjected to layers of processing, preservation, enhancement and packaging so that it can satisfy the requirements of scale, transportation, shelf life, consistency and profitability.

We alter the soil to produce the crop.

We alter the crop to survive the supply chain.

We alter the food to survive the shelf.

And eventually, we alter ourselves to survive the consequences.

There is something macabre about the cycle.

We begin to resemble the systems we have created:

Overworked.

Overprocessed.

Overstimulated.

Increasingly dependent upon external intervention to maintain what we call normal.

But the pattern does not end with the body.

It has reached somewhere even more intimate.

The human mind.

THE NEXT RESOURCE IS YOUR ATTENTION

Consider how much of the day is now occupied by consumption.

Something appears on the screen.

We respond.

Another thing appears.

We respond again.

An image.

A headline.

An opinion.

A video.

An outrage.

A joke.

Another person's thought.

Another person's interpretation.

Another person's life.

There is always another external prompt waiting.

The danger is not simply that we are consuming too much information.

It is that we are increasingly training ourselves to exist in a state of **reaction**.

The more time we spend endlessly scrolling, the more time we surrender that might otherwise have been available for our minds to wander, question, imagine, remember, connect and generate thoughts of their own.

Over time, the balance between receiving thought and generating thought begins to shift.

The mind becomes extraordinarily practiced at consuming, sorting and reacting to information while spending progressively less uninterrupted time producing thought that originates from within itself.

We enter a state of passive consumption accompanied by the illusion of enormous mental activity.

Our brains are certainly busy.

But **busyness is not necessarily thought**.

AND NOW, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

This becomes even more consequential as we enter the age of artificial intelligence.

AI can provide the answer before we have struggled with the question.

It can articulate the sentence before we have searched for the words.

It can organize the argument before we have wrestled with its contradictions.

It can generate possibilities before we have sat with uncertainty long enough for an idea of our own to emerge.

The danger is not artificial intelligence itself.

The danger lies in what happens when we surrender too readily the intellectual effort that should precede its use.

A tool that extends human thought is one thing.

A tool that gradually replaces the necessity of human thought is something else entirely.

We should know the difference.

Original thought requires something increasingly scarce:

Unoccupied mental space.

Moments in which nothing is being fed to us.

No scrolling.

No notifications.

No algorithm deciding what should occupy our attention next.

No machine immediately completing the thought.

Just the human mind encountering itself.

Our attention, imagination and capacity for independent thought are also forms of wealth.

Protect them.

THE LESSON IS LARGER THAN LAND

Perhaps this is ultimately not an argument about agriculture.

Nor is it simply about technology.

It is about our understanding of **value**.

Fallow land is not necessarily useless land.

A forest is not timber waiting to happen.

A mineral deposit is not merely something waiting to be extracted.

A river is not simply water awaiting commercialization.

A traditional practice is not necessarily backward because a market has not assigned it monetary value.

Silence is not empty time.

Boredom is not necessarily a defect.

A wandering mind is not necessarily an idle mind.

And a society should not have to destroy everything it inherited in order to prove that it has arrived in the modern world.

We must become far more sophisticated in distinguishing between **wealth and its extraction**.

They are not the same thing.

Sometimes the greatest evidence of wealth is precisely that something valuable remains.

AFRICA: KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE

Africa will change enormously in the coming decades.

Cities will expand.

Populations will grow.

Infrastructure will be built.

Agriculture will modernize.

Technology will penetrate almost every aspect of life.

The resources above and beneath African soil will become increasingly important to the global economy.

Much of this transformation is necessary.

But Africa must enter it with its eyes open.

We do not need to reject modernity.

We do not need to romanticize poverty.

We do not need to preserve every inherited practice simply because it is old.

We need something much more difficult:

Discernment.

The ability to distinguish development from extraction.

Wealth from monetization.

Productivity from exhaustion.

Technological capacity from wisdom.

Adoption from imitation.

Progress from the repetition of somebody else's history.

Those of us who have lived within societies further along this particular trajectory have a responsibility to say what we have seen.

There are extraordinary achievements worth adopting.

There are systems worth learning from.

There are technologies capable of transforming African lives.

But there are also mistakes.

We should not inherit those mistakes simply because they arrive beautifully packaged under the name of progress.

Africa's opportunity is greater than catching up.

It is the opportunity to learn without repeating everything that had to be learned the hard way.

Modernize.

Build.

Invent.

Transform.

But know what you possess before you exchange it.

Know the value of what lies above the ground.

Know the value of what lies beneath it.

Know the value contained within your cultures, communities and accumulated knowledge.

Know the value of your attention.

Know the value of your mind.

And be especially vigilant when you are taught to despise something you possess shortly before someone else discovers a profitable use for it.

Recognize your wealth.

Protect it at all costs.

What appears undeveloped today may simply be what has not yet been exhausted.

What you are being encouraged to abandon may one day be precisely what others are desperately trying to recover.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

And above all, as our capacity to transform ourselves and the world becomes ever greater, we must retain the wisdom to ask whether every transformation should be pursued simply because it has become possible.

Just because we can does not mean we should.