

THE RETURN

How Do We Make Africa Relevant Again?

*A beautiful and invigorating challenge: creating meaningful alternatives
for life in the age of AI*

There comes a point when a people must look into the mirror and honestly articulate what is looking back at them.

For Africans, that moment has arrived.

We inhabit a continent of extraordinary human, cultural, intellectual, and natural wealth, yet we continue to live within systems that leave us dependent, fragmented, and uncertain of our own authority.

We are surrounded by the evidence of our creative capacity, but we have been trained to interpret ourselves primarily through deficiency.

We are told that our ways are primitive, our knowledge is superstition, our languages are obstacles, our institutions are

obsolete, and our future depends upon how successfully we imitate those declared to be ahead of us.

Unfortunately, the broken condition in which much of African life now exists appears to confirm these judgments. Dysfunction is presented as proof of inherent incapacity. What is rarely considered is that a damaged system cannot be used as evidence that the original system possessed no intelligence.

Its present condition may instead reveal what happens when institutions are dismantled, knowledge transmission is interrupted, and people are compelled to survive within structures they neither designed nor control.

But we must resist the temptation to explain everything through what was done to us.

Colonialism disrupted the foundations of African life, but our responsibility now is to confront what we have become in response to that disruption.

We must reject the narrative that has left us compromised and surrendered—our faculties inverted, switched off, or tuned to frequencies that sustain an order designed to keep us perpetually dependent.

This is not who we are.
Our history tells us otherwise.

WHAT DOES RELEVANCE MEAN?

Africa will not become relevant again merely by achieving higher rates of economic growth, producing more billionaires, exporting more raw materials, constructing taller buildings, or consuming more luxury goods.

We will not become relevant by offering cheaper labor to global industries, supplying minerals for technologies owned elsewhere, or becoming a vast marketplace for products, platforms, and ideas created by others.

That is participation without authorship.

Nor will Africa become relevant by competing to reproduce the world exactly as others have designed it.

Our ambition cannot be to become more efficient participants in a system that is exhausting the planet, concentrating power, commodifying human attention, and diminishing the conditions necessary for meaningful life.

Africa becomes relevant when it resumes producing consequential ideas about how human beings might live.

It becomes relevant when it recovers the confidence and capacity to create—not merely products, but systems; not merely symbols, but institutions; not merely wealth, but a coherent conception of the good life.

The question is therefore not simply: How does Africa catch up?

We must first ask: Catch up with what—and follow it where?

The dominant model of civilization depends upon endless extraction from a finite planet.

Its measurements of progress require continuous consumption, accelerated production, planned obsolescence, and the artificial creation of needs.

It has produced extraordinary technologies, prolonged lives, connected continents, and expanded access to knowledge.

These achievements cannot be denied.

But neither can their cost.

Humanity has broken through the upper limits of nature's precarious and deeply integrated balance.

We have tilted that balance disproportionately in our favor, treating the earth as an inexhaustible warehouse and every other form of life as secondary to human appetite.

What appeared to be advancement has brought the living world to a precipice of unknown and potentially irreversible consequences.

Africa's great opportunity is not to deny modernity. It is to ask whether another modernity can be made.

THE RETURN

The Return is not a journey backward.

It is not an attempt to reverse history, reproduce ancestral life exactly as it once existed, or retreat from science, technology, and the contemporary world.

It is not an invitation to romanticize Africa's past or declare every inherited practice worthy of preservation.

The Return is to a state of mind rooted in selfhood and sovereignty.

It is the recovery of our authority to know ourselves, define ourselves, think from within our own consciousness, and determine the terms upon which we engage the world.

It is a return to the condition from which original thought becomes possible.

From selfhood comes authorship.

From authorship comes the capacity to build.

From building comes ownership.

From ownership comes sovereignty.

And sovereignty allows us to participate in the world without disappearing into someone else's imagination.

The Return restores our understanding of ourselves as creative forces—not merely consumers of other people's realities, imitators of inherited systems, or passive subjects of history.

But sovereignty must not become another doctrine of human domination.

We are not separate from nature, standing above it and entitled to reorder it indefinitely around our desires.

We exist as fully integrated members of an extraordinarily complex living ecosystem.

Our creativity becomes meaningful only when it is exercised with respect for the larger order that makes all life possible.

The Return is therefore also a return to heightened awareness: an understanding of our possibilities for good and evil, creation and destruction, care and exploitation—and a conscious decision to choose what protects and enlarges life.

It is the exercise of power with restraint, intelligence with humility, freedom with responsibility, and creativity with respect for the dignity of being human.

The Return is not Africa going backward.

It is Africa returning to the place within itself from which it can move forward on its own terms.

THE COURAGE TO LOOK INTO THE MIRROR

We cannot recover sovereignty without honesty.

For too long, we have directed our attention outward—toward colonialism, racism, exploitation, and the continuing inequalities of the global order.

These forces are real and remain consequential.

But a people cannot regain authorship if its entire explanation of itself rests upon what others have done to it.

We must also examine what we now reproduce from within: our dependencies, appetites, imitations, failures, and vanities.

We imitate the West, but we also imitate our cultures.

Much of what is presented today as African culture is cultural cosplay: fragments of language, clothing, titles, ceremonies, food, music, and symbolism performed upon foundations governed by an entirely different worldview.

We reproduce the appearance of culture without the institutions, obligations, disciplines, knowledge systems, and ethical structures that once gave those expressions meaning.

This is surface appliqué mistaken for depth.

Culture is not merely what a people wear, eat, celebrate, display, or perform.

It is the underlying order through which they understand existence, organize society, educate children, regulate conduct, transmit knowledge, relate to nature, distribute responsibility, and reproduce themselves across generations.

Cultural cosplay is dangerous because it creates the illusion of continuity where profound rupture has occurred.

Because the surface remains visible, we persuade ourselves that the foundation is intact.

We perform remembrance while continuing to think, desire, build, worship, govern, educate, and measure success according to the very order that displaced what we claim to preserve.

We imitate the West structurally while imitating Africa aesthetically.

That is not continuity.

It is a double imitation.

The Return must therefore recover meaning before appearance, structure before performance, and institutional substance before cultural display.

Otherwise, we will merely decorate the dominant system with African motifs and mistake the decoration for liberation.

WE MUST NOT ROMANTICIZE OURSELVES

To recover African civilizational intelligence is not to declare that everything African was good or that every ancestral practice should be restored.

Human beings have always been capable of wisdom and cruelty.

African societies were no exception.

Sovereignty includes the authority to examine our inheritance critically: to recover what remains valuable, reinterpret what no longer fits, combine indigenous understanding with contemporary knowledge, and abandon what diminishes human dignity.

Some ideas are good.

Others are not.

The purpose of selfhood is not to protect us from criticism. It is to give us a stable ground from which we can judge for ourselves.

Nor should we reduce African knowledge to a mystical intimacy with nature, as though science, invention, abstraction, and technological ambition belong to others. Africans have always observed, tested, adapted, constructed, cultivated, healed, calculated, organized, and created.

The question is not whether Africa had knowledge. The question is whether we can recover its underlying intelligence and allow it to generate new knowledge under present conditions.

ANOTHER MODERNITY

Before colonial invasion and the imposition of extractive industrial systems, many African communities developed ways of living shaped by locality, reciprocity, repair, reuse, distributed responsibility, and accumulated knowledge of their environments.

These systems were neither static nor perfect. But embedded within them were serious ideas about how human beings might live together without separating individual wellbeing from communal survival or human prosperity from the health of the surrounding world.

These ideas should not remain museum objects.

They must be brought into conversation with contemporary architecture, agriculture, medicine, engineering, finance, education, design, digital technology, and artificial intelligence.

The work before us is one of translation.

How might indigenous environmental knowledge inform the design of contemporary African settlements?

What can local building materials teach us about thermal comfort, energy consumption, and climate-responsive architecture?

How might older systems of reciprocity and shared responsibility inform new forms of insurance, cooperative ownership, childcare, eldercare, and social welfare?

What might natural ventilation, water harvesting, local food production, distributed energy, repair cultures, and circular material systems look like when supported by advanced engineering and intelligent computation?

How might oral knowledge be documented without stripping it of context or transferring its ownership elsewhere?

How might African languages become instruments of science, technology, philosophy, and digital life rather than being confined to the home, the ceremony, and the joke?

The purpose is neither to imitate the West nor reenact the past.

It is to create another modernity.

APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY

The age of artificial intelligence requires us to ask a question that technological societies have often avoided:

What makes a technology appropriate?

Technology is not inherently progress.

It must be judged by more than novelty, scale, speed, or profitability.

We must also ask what it does to the human being, the community, and the earth.

Does it enlarge human capability or create permanent dependency?

Can the people who use it understand, maintain, adapt, and repair it?

Does it distribute power or concentrate it?

Does it address a genuine need, or must a need be manufactured to justify its existence?

Does it save human labor in ways that increase dignity, or merely displace people to enrich those who own the machinery?

Does it strengthen the community—or quietly make the community unnecessary?

Appropriate technology should be accessible, maintainable, environmentally responsible, locally adaptable, and proportionate to the problem it addresses.

It should serve human life rather than require human life to reorganize itself around the demands of the machine.

We must also expand our understanding of technology.

A forest is infrastructure.

Soil is a living technology.

Seeds contain intelligence accumulated over generations.

Natural ventilation, shade, fermentation, water channels, crop rotation, communal labor, material repair, and oral memory are technologies.

They are not primitive substitutes for “real” technology. They are complex systems whose intelligence industrial society frequently dismissed before understanding their value.

The choice is not between nature and machines.
It is not between the primitive and the advanced.

The real challenge is to establish a thoughtful balance between natural and artificial technologies—using each where it best supports life.

Even the expression “off-grid” reveals the assumptions of the dominant order.

It places the centralized grid at the natural center of civilization and treats anything outside it as marginal, deficient, or backward.

But why must a household or community capable of producing its own energy, collecting and managing its own water, growing some of its own food, and maintaining essential systems be described according to what it is “off”?

What is called off-grid may be more accurately understood as distributed, autonomous, resilient, or locally sufficient. It may represent not a retreat from modernity, but the foundation of a better one.

REDISTRIBUTING THE ABILITY TO LIVE

Modern society depends upon enormous technological networks for energy, water, food, transportation, communication, shelter, medicine, and finance.

For most people, these systems are no longer optional. They govern daily survival.

Whoever controls them therefore possesses immense power over the lives of others.

The Return must redistribute the capacity to survive and thrive.

A community capable of producing energy, managing water, cultivating food, constructing shelter, exchanging value, preserving knowledge, and maintaining essential technologies becomes less vulnerable to hoarding, disruption, and manipulation.

This is not isolation from the world.

It is the recovery of bargaining power within it.

When the ability to live is widely distributed, excessive power cannot accumulate as easily in the hands of a few.

Communities are less easily coerced.

People are less dependent upon distant systems whose owners do not know them and whose failures they cannot repair.

Everything required to live according to our own worldview must therefore be built again—from the inconspicuous to the monumental.

When we build, we own.

What we own becomes the foundation of our wealth.

AFRICA IN THE AGE OF AI

Artificial intelligence could become a profound instrument of African renewal.

It could help translate African languages, preserve oral histories, improve agricultural yields, expand medical access, support local manufacturing, model climate-responsive settlements, coordinate distributed infrastructure, personalize education, and place sophisticated creative tools into the hands of millions.

But access alone is not sovereignty.

If Africans remain merely users of systems designed, trained, owned, and governed elsewhere, AI may deepen the same dependency it appears to overcome.

We may become more productive without becoming more autonomous.

We may generate more data while owning none of the structures that extract value from it.

The questions must therefore be larger than: How do we gain access to AI?

Who designs the systems?

Whose languages and knowledge do they contain?

Who owns the infrastructure?

Who determines what problems are worthy of being solved?

Who benefits from the data?

What happens to the communities whose knowledge is absorbed into machines?

What forms of human judgment must never be surrendered?

Artificial intelligence should help Africans become greater authors of their world.

It should not become another invisible authority through which our realities are defined elsewhere and returned to us as instructions.

Africa must enter the age of AI as a thinking civilization—not merely as a market.

RECOVERING HUMAN TIME

Technological sovereignty will mean little if we remain psychologically governed by the systems we claim to control.

How do we retrain minds conditioned by dopamine-driven platforms to expect immediate gratification, even though we

understand that a seed planted today cannot be harvested tomorrow?

Natural life unfolds through gestation.

A seed must germinate, take root, grow, flower, and bear fruit.

Human development follows a similar rhythm.

So do knowledge, relationships, communities, institutions, and civilizations.

Artificial systems increasingly operate at speeds far beyond our natural rhythms and often beyond our genuine needs.

They teach us to interpret waiting as failure, slowness as inefficiency, and restraint as deprivation.

They weaken our capacity to sustain attention, endure uncertainty, and commit ourselves to anything whose reward is not immediate.

The challenge is not simply to slow down.

It is to recover an intelligent relationship with time.

Some processes should be accelerated: access to medicine, justice, education, information, and essential services.

But other things must be cultivated.

Technology may shorten a process, but it cannot abolish gestation.

Wisdom cannot be downloaded.

Trust cannot be automated.

Character cannot be rushed.

A civilization cannot recover itself overnight.

Everything worthy of becoming has a rhythm.

We must relearn how to remain present long enough for that becoming to occur.

A DIFFERENT MEANING OF WEALTH

Some will ask: How does enlightenment put food on my table?

How does recovering selfhood secure my tomorrow?

The answer is that selfhood is not separate from material wellbeing.

A people who cannot define their needs, organize their capabilities, protect their knowledge, or build the systems upon which they depend will remain poor regardless of the wealth beneath their soil.

But Africa cannot protect itself by producing a new elite whose highest ambition is to consume like the old imperial powers.

That merely changes the identity of the beneficiaries while preserving the machinery of destruction.

We need a new class of wealth—one that respects nature, builds enduring institutions, invests in public dignity, and understands that private abundance cannot indefinitely coexist with collective deprivation.

Prosperity must mean more than accumulation.

It must include health, time, knowledge, beauty, belonging, ecological stability, cultural continuity, creative freedom, and liberation from unnecessary dependence.

A wealthy society is not merely one in which a few people can afford lives of spectacular excess.

It is one in which ordinary people possess the conditions necessary to live meaningful lives.

This will also require a mature response to population pressures—not coercion or the policing of the vulnerable, but education, reproductive agency, healthcare, economic security, and the understanding that human freedom must coexist with ecological limits.

Our goal cannot be to become better destroyers of the planet.

We are capable of imagining something more measured: a world that is less noisy, less polluted, less aggressive, less excessive, and less wasteful—a form of prosperity governed not only by what can be accumulated, but by what should be preserved.

THE INVITATION

My African brothers and sisters, we were taught to feel ashamed of what was broken without being told how it was broken, who benefited from the breaking, or what intelligence existed before it.

But we must not remain permanently enclosed within the story of our injury.

What has been inherited in a damaged condition must now be examined, repaired, translated, and rebuilt by us.

We do not need to reject everything from elsewhere. Neither should we accept anything merely because it arrives bearing the authority of the modern world.

We must recover the confidence to decide what to adopt, what to adapt, what to combine with our own knowledge, what to refuse, and what to originate.

The world does not need an Africa that merely duplicates its failures.

It needs an Africa capable of offering another possibility: technologically advanced without being ecologically destructive; prosperous without being pathologically consumptive; connected without dissolving community; modern without becoming amnesiac; powerful without making domination its purpose.

This is the beautiful and invigorating challenge before us.

What if Africa's task in the age of artificial intelligence is not to catch up with an exhausted model of civilization, but to help design what comes after it?

The Return is not nostalgia.

It is not costume.

It is not retreat.

It is the return of consciousness, self-possession, ecological belonging, creative authority, and civilizational purpose.

It is the return of Africa to authorship.

And from that recovered ground, we may begin to build—not only a different future for ourselves, but a meaningful alternative for humanity.