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AFRICA'S PAST AND OUR FUTURE
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A Nigerian proverb notes, "In a time of crisis, the wise build bridges and the foolish build dams." Today I would like to build a bridge from our current U.S. culture and history to African history. Such a bridge can provide a new story about the human place in the scheme of things. Africans, our earliest human ancestors, offer us the longest perspective on history of any people on the planet and they challenge some fundamental modern assumptions about how humans have lived together in the past and might live together in the future.

Three Major Contributions of African History

African history is essential to meeting present challenges for three reasons. First, the long duration of African history offers the distance and perspective that twenty-first century citizens need to understand the challenges humans have overcome on the journey to the modern world. For example, almost all the foods eaten today were domesticated thousands of years ago (before the rise of Roman civilization). Almost everything in the modern diet is a result of the hard, experimental work of developing new kinds of domesticated plants and animals from wild ones. While our modern food system has produced many different kinds of processed foods, such as cheese crackers, they use ingredients that initially came from plants and animals that have long been staples of the human diet.

The second reason that African history is important and useful in developing a new sense of our place in the world is that historians of the continent have used new methods of obtaining and reading the historical record. African historians have forged a new path that has allowed them the freedom to think differently about history. Such methods include historical linguistics

and oral traditions and lead to different ways of thinking about and understanding history. Historical linguistics, for example, builds family trees of languages and thus cultures. Using this data, historians can identify points of culture contact through shared words and ideas. It also helps identify long-standing ideas and traditions, such as the value of clans and lineages or the role of gatherer-hunter peoples in helping farmers survive in a new locale. Oral traditions, stories told about events in the distant past, also make important contributions. They are a window into one of the defining aspects of African history—maintaining history orally. We in this room are inheritors of an approach to learning that gives primary importance to the written word. Thus it is hard to imagine the mental capacity that African oral historians, if not all Africans, possessed when the only means of storing information was in the minds of those alive. *Griots* (oral historians) in West Africa, for example, told historical accounts that could last for days. And, the audience actively participated through call and response and singing. Because of the kinds of ideas that these sources reveal, African history, particularly early African history becomes a study of cultures (including religion and social organization), ideas, adapting to a wide variety of environments, and technologies rather than a study of wealthy people, classes, royalty, church history, and conflict.

The third reason African history is important is that traditions and ideas that cultures have held for thousands of years, are literally, sustainable; that is, they are adapted to an environment and people and their needs over the long-term. In the West, one such idea is democracy. But there are many similarly powerful ideas in African history that most of us know nothing about. These are often ideas and ways of doing and thinking that have endured over long periods of time because they were flexible and could be re-interpreted over and over again. Thus, they have not remained the same, much like democracy has changed from the times of the

Greek city-states to presidential elections in the U.S. in 2016, but hold fast to certain threads and tenets that make the idea recognizable across time.

There are two such ideas from African history that I want to explore a bit more with you today. The first is heterarchy, societies organized around a variety of forms of authority. The second is the informal economy. They are both significant in our everyday lives yet receive very little attention in comparison to the ideas that run opposite to them, hierarchy and the formal economy. And I would hasten to add that if both were used more in our daily lives they might be part of the solution we are seeking for a more livable world for all. The emphasis we place on the informal economy and our virtual ignorance of heterarchy suggests much about our priorities and the sources of our problems.

Heterarchy

First to heterarchy. Heterarchy is a way of thinking about power and authority across and between social groups, institutions and people. It implies diffuse, independent sources of power, rather than concentrated, vertical power. A community with a school board, mayor's council, and volunteer fire department has multiple sources of authority and power. A community run by a mafia boss does not.

Many African societies for millennia had a variety of structures that included a chief or elder who was respected for his (or her) wisdom, or wealth, or access to resources, or a link to the past, or some other reason. But, usually he (or she, more rarely) led in consultation with other older men and women to make decisions and judge cases. A chief often worked alongside others with competing realms of authority--religious, intellectual, or economic. One way to think about societies with heterarchy is that they had unofficial leaders but not rulers.

But it is even more complicated than that because often hierarchical kingdoms involved heterarchy. In heterarchy, the search is to understand the variety of ways that power and authority were manifest in a particular society rather than focusing on a small number of positions or people in whom it appeared most authority was vested.

For example, a kingdom in East Africa, Buganda, for which the modern day country, Uganda, is named, was formed out of heterarchy. There *kabakas*, or kings, reigned from the fourteenth century to the present day. Buganda came to be the most powerful kingdom in East Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was one of many states formed starting 1000 years ago on the rich agricultural land that surrounds Lake Victoria in East Africa

Before the 1300s, people identified by kinship and were united by a spiritual leader who represented a spirit that could be called on for help. Spirits kept land and people healthy. For most African societies until recently there was a significant investment in the health of the land, for if the land did not provide food in the form of crops, or grass for livestock, people would go hungry. Most people in industrialized countries think about their future in terms of individual efforts and support from close family. But, this way of thinking is a product of our more recent history and our reliance on scientific explanations for disasters and ill health. Access to great labor saving technology has enabled most in the globalized North to escape a fair amount of discomfort and disease that their forebears had to endure and to accomplish tasks singly that before would have required multiple people. As a result of these developments, it is easy to assume that technology will continue to aid humanity as new problems occur. Most people throughout most time did not have such a view of the world. Their level of technology and low population numbers, among other things, meant that they felt far more vulnerable to natural occurrences. Thus, collective actions to promote well-being were essential. People needed to be in right relation to each other for the society to be healthy, as in the case of Buganda. Thus,

spirits that protected people and the land were an essential element of successful societies. And the people who had connections to spirits were leaders.

As the Buganda kingdom expanded in the 1700s, clanship became a means of connecting people who were not necessarily related, who did not share the same spiritual leader or in face-to-face contact with each other. As these new clans came into being, people drew on a variety of knowledge to create communities that could thrive. Thus, clanship was formed in order to maximize well being rather than simply kinship. For example, the genealogy of the Otter clan describes a ritual priest, a talented doctor, a maker of mallets used in bark cloth production, a bark cloth artisan and a famous diviner coming together. Through alliances with dispersed peoples, the Otter clan combined necessary skills for a successful community.

Thus, the king, or *kubaka*, had to recognize both spiritual and clan leaders in his daily decisions, all these leaders were represented at his capital. The *kabaka's* authority was checked in other ways as well. The Queen Mother acted as an independent political figure in Buganda politics. With separate living quarters and the ability to depose the king, she acted as a rival authority figure with her own land and followers.

In Buganda, a person could follow many different authority figures, could show allegiance to one person during a time of crisis and another at some other point in time. Thus, power was not a zero sum game, where if one person gained more, another person had less. Instead, it was created and re-enacted over time and a person only had power if others agreed that they had it. Power was fluid, embodied in multiple positions of authority and skills, and had deep roots in ideas about spirits (health, really) and relationships.

Informal Economy

Another institution that we can learn more about from Africa is the informal economy. Africans are integrated into the global economy in a variety of ways. They grow food, some for their own use and some for the world market; engage in economic opportunities that are new and innovative; send their children to school with the hope of providing them more opportunities; and they rely on and appreciate imported commodities, such as clothing, shoes and medicine. Yet, many of their daily interactions take place outside of the formal economy.

Briefly, an informal economy is one that is not recognized by the government and can include both legal activities, like selling coffee, donuts, or oranges on the side of the road and illegal activities, such as selling drugs or smuggled goods. On a two-mile walk into a university campus in Kumasi, Ghana in 2006, for example, I would regularly do business with a variety of people on the continuum between formal and informal economic activity, including a tailor who worked in an old shipping container who did pay taxes to the government but worked by himself with one other employee in a location that had not been established for the business and in a space that he had to provide himself; a shoe repairman who operated similarly; a donut-seller who set up a wok full of frying fat on top of a fire on the side of the road; and a phone card seller who had a small table that she stashed behind a building at the end of the work day. The last two had minimal infrastructure for their business and had no permits and likely paid no taxes on their earnings.

Scholars have tried to capture these activities and transactions with the term “informal economy” or sometimes “shadow economy.” Both suggest something not as important, efficient, or normal. The formal economy, by contrast, consists of employment in an organized environment with a formal contract and pre-defined work conditions, responsibilities, payment and schedule. The institutions and organization that offer this employment pay taxes and report

to the government in a variety of ways. In the informal economy, a worker has no contract, no fixed hours or place of employment, and usually earns enough each day to pay for expenses for one or two days. The work is usually untaxed and unsupported by the government.

What we think we know about African economies comes from statistics about the formal economy; such statistics claim Africans live on less than one or two dollars a day. How do Africans survive on two dollars a day? They don't. They have a network of obligations, relationships, debt and credit, labor and compensation, much of it in the informal economy, that allow them to meet most of their basic needs and provide for their families. In 2000, forty-two percent of the gross domestic product for sub-Saharan African countries came from informal economic activity. In Ghana at the same time, up to ninety percent of economic activity was in the informal sector.

When the informal economy is the primary way in which the majority of a country's population makes a living, then, it is normal and ordinary and deserves to become a much more significant facet of research, writing, and policy-making. It might be time to find a new language for such work, and to call it "(i)n(f)ormal" and "familiar."

The informal economy's origins in Africa lie in colonial policy, particularly urban policy. Urbanization in Africa, Asia and Latin America over the last few decades has taken place without industrialization or development. The result has been large urban populations with limited job and economic opportunities, often described as slums. During the colonial era, Europeans kept races separate. This marginalized most African urban residents. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in East Africa the British established three residential zones. Zone I was for Europeans and was marked by bungalows set in spacious surroundings. Zone II was for Asian residents and Zone III was for Africans. Zone III was the furthest from the city center and was marked by dwellings of non-permanent materials. Keeping areas segregated was challenging and

required constant vigilance. Native houses in Zone II were not allowed to be structurally improved, for example, in the hope that without improvements, the occupants would have to move.

The economic consequences of colonial urban policy were significant for Africans. Residential policy imposed severe restrictions on African entrepreneurship. In 1931 when the African population in the city was over 20,000, the number of African shopkeepers in Dar es Salaam was two. In the interwar years, the African population was roughly 26,000 of whom 14,000 were skilled Africans with low-paying jobs that did not cover their monthly expenses. The rest, almost half the African population, were likely in the informal economy. Many urban Africans, relegated to inferior residential locations and inferior economic positions, turned to informal economic opportunities to supplement wage work or as a stopgap measure in the hopes of eventually obtaining wage work. A 1956 survey of Dar es Salaam noted that there were petty traders of hot coffee, tea, fruit, roast meat, fish, coconuts, firewood, charcoal, flattened kerosene cans for roofing, old clothes and peanuts, among other things. At this same time, one petty trader told officials in the 1950s that he was not trading because he wanted to but because he had no other way to pay rent and tax.

After independence, the Tanzanian government constructed urban policy in ways that were very similar to the colonial era both in terms of housing and acceptable economic activities. Urban settlement in Dar es Salaam grew at ten per cent per year between 1969 and 1975. Wage employment increased 5.4 per cent annually and informal sector and unemployment increased at 20 per cent per year. Since 1980 and globalization, the situation has worsened.

It is within this context that Tanzanians live on less than a dollar a day in Dar es Salaam. On the ground, “poor” Africans are spending more dollars a day than that, so there is a gap between standard economic measures and the economic practices of many Tanzanians. And,

that is not likely to change soon. United Nations' projections are that 90 percent of urban Africa's new workers over the next decade will have to rely on informal employment. In most places, women are the dominant informal market workers.

One interpretation of a planetary situation where increasing numbers are living and working in informal sectors of urban areas is that "cities have become a dumping ground for a surplus population." In statistical terms, these people do not count. But, of course, they do, both to their kin and friends but also to the cities and nations in which they find themselves. They are a strong signal that our institutions and means of reckoning have not kept up with human reality.

African urban dwellers are part of a global economy in which all have a part to play. They are no less a part of it than anyone else. And, in fact, their presence in cities and responses to the difficult circumstances of their lives are in many ways a reflection on the choices other governments and corporations have made. To write them off is to suggest that others have no responsibility or relationship to them when this is not the case.

The informal economy is worldwide. A 1983 survey reported that Sweden, Denmark, Belgium and Italy had the highest levels of informal activity in Europe. The informal economy is thriving in the United States as well. There are very few studies of the informal economy in the US but the city of Los Angeles has data that provides a good picture of the informal economy there a decade ago. Informal employment comprised fifteen percent of the County's labor force in 2004. Approximately sixty percent of those in the informal economy were undocumented migrant workers. Of course, in Los Angeles and Dar es Salaam, every worker in the informal economy is a worker who is not contributing to local, state and federal taxes and thus not financially supporting our crumbling educational and transportation systems. Our migrant worker population, rising numbers of independent contractors, freelance workers, and others, suggests that we are close behind Africans in experiencing a larger informal economy.

Conclusion

It is hard for me to imagine a future in which the numbers of people who are participating in the informal economy decreases. It is also hard for me to imagine a future in which we would not all be served by living in communities, states and nations with greater access to heterarchical forms of power. One of the chief complaints about our political system is that it has been bought by those with the money to gain access to key decision-makers. Heterarchy and the informal economy are in some ways two solutions to many of the problems we face in the United States in the 21st century. It is possible that the informal economy is not how we want to structure our society moving forward, but its growing presence is a signal, if we choose to pay attention, of how much is going wrong for many people. And, with more access to various forms of authority, it just might be possible to correct some of the challenges that have created a growing informal economy. More heterarchy, more roles and ways of exercising authority and decision-making are certainly one way to imagine creating a more equitable economic system in which all could earn a decent living and contribute to the governments of which they are a part.