

Time for the world to learn from Africa

By [Prof Francis Petersen](#)

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Africa has come a long way in shaking off the image of a continent that is consistently dependent on and trailing the rest of the world for investment, development, direction and validation. We are diversifying our economies to move away from economic dependence on the global north, and actively searching for African solutions to African problems. Moreover, while Africa remains an attractive investment destination, it is now more sought after for its people than for its physical assets.



Prof Francis Petersen

It is often said that Africa ought to learn from the west – but not much is said about what there is to learn from Africa. At this point in time, there is in actual fact much that the rest of the world can learn from Africa.

At the University of the Free State (UFS) – we greatly treasure our African heritage and take care to observe Africa Day each year in a mindful and inclusive manner.

The theme of our 2021 UFS Virtual Africa Month celebration is: One Africa together forever – solidarity in knowledge production and recording. Africa Day and Africa Month is an opportunity to strengthen solidarity within our region by reaching out to different communities across our continent and learning from their insights and experiences.

But it is also a time to reflect on the contributions our continent has made to the global society over the ages.

What can the world learn from Africa?

Preserving our heritage

Before anything else, we need to ensure that the world has a legitimate, credible record of African achievements and contributions.

The recent devastating fire at the University of Cape Town that gutted the irreplaceable African Studies collection of the Jagger Reading Room was a hard blow to anyone who values our African heritage. It was a painful reminder that we need to do everything we can to safeguard the records and artefacts that encapsulates our continent's role in global development in different fields.

Birthplace of humanity

Most scientists agree that modern humans evolved from somewhere on the African continent before spreading across the world and becoming the dominant species we are today. The mere fact that Africa is the birthplace of humankind should be drenched in significance for anyone interested in exploring the common roots of different nations.

In the words of the great African-American poet and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou:

“ If you don't know where you've come from, you don't know where you're going. ”

Science and technology in Ancient Africa

It is unfortunate that, apart from ancient Egypt, the accomplishments of ancient African communities have not been that widely publicised at all.

There is scientific evidence of unique numeration systems developed thousands of years ago in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; ancient Tanzanian furnaces used in metallurgy and tool making that far exceeded those of the Romans; and of ancient African discoveries concerning stars and planets that formed the building blocks of modern-day astronomy.

When it comes to architecture, the Egyptian pyramids and evidence of impressive structures found in the ruins of great ancient cities in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Mali reflect great architectural and engineering skills.

It is encouraging to see how much of this information is now consistently being incorporated into our school curriculums. The UFS, like many other institutions of higher learning, is taking up this baton through a consistent process of reviewing and decolonising our curriculums to achieve a more comprehensive and balanced knowledge base in all fields of study.

Vast potential for agriculture

Africa's value to the global community exists in various forms today. Across the African continent, plummeting revenue from natural resources such as oil, gold, and coal has led to diversified economies and large-scale investment in agribusiness.

Currently, the agriculture sector employs more than half of the labour force in Africa. On top of that, the World Economic Forum (WEF) revealed in 2019 that Africa had the highest entrepreneurship rate in the world, with around 22% of working-age Africans starting new businesses. Provided that African countries manage to get the necessary quality control and food-safety management systems in place, some investors are already talking about the potential of Africa to 'feed the world' within a few decades.

Indigenous knowledge systems

The recognition of indigenous knowledge is gaining ground worldwide. Here at the UFS, Indigenous Knowledge Systems is a specialist field in our Centre for Africa Studies, and is actively pursued as a major branch of its academic and research endeavours.

One of our flagship research efforts is the pharmacological assessment of the healing qualities of cannabis, which is believed to be one of humankind's first cultivated crops, used in Southern Africa since about 1400 AD for spiritual and medicinal purposes. Systematic medicinal research done by our Department of Pharmacology investigates its use as a treatment for cancer, pain management, diabetes, and hypertension. As a testament to the world's acknowledgement of the value of traditional African medicines, our Director of Pharmacology, Prof Mottalepula Matsabisa, was recently appointed as Chairperson of the WHO Regional Expert Advisory Committee on Traditional Medicines for Covid-19.

Africa's response to Covid-19

When it comes to Covid-19, many commentators have in recent times been vocal on how the rest of the world can learn a few things from Africa's response action to the pandemic. Some point out the fact that in many African countries, dedicated pandemic response systems used for previous pandemics (such as Ebola) were kept in place, whereas in many Western and European countries these often had to be hastily convened or re-convened.

Many African countries' health systems also have a strong inherent focus on prevention, obviating an overreliance on treatment, which can prevent infections from spiralling out of control.

African leaders have also generally been praised for clear, cohesive, and united communication as well as far better collaboration between countries, than their counterparts from elsewhere in the world.

Solidarity and Ubuntu

It is this kind of valuable solidarity that we aim to cherish and rekindle with our Africa Day celebrations. And it is this solidarity that holds a great lesson for the rest of the world.

If there is one thing that we have all learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic, it is that no country is an island, and that we should learn from one another's mistakes and successes. The solidarity that is so important to Africans, should become a priority for the rest of the world too.

And at the core of African solidarity lies the age-old concept of Ubuntu – the ancient African word that encapsulates the idea of a shared humanity. The meaning of 'ubuntu' has become more nuanced and textured over time – that much is clear when one looks at its definition in the New World Encyclopedia:

“ Ubuntu implies an appreciation of traditional beliefs, and a constant awareness that an individual's actions today are a reflection on the past, and will have far-reaching consequences for the future. A person with ubuntu knows his or her place in the universe and is consequently able to interact gracefully with other individuals. ”

It is a word that embodies sustainability, selflessness, and tolerance – so much of what we all need right now.

In an era marked by fears of dehumanising brought about by the fourth industrial revolution and isolation brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, I believe this 'graceful interaction with other individuals' is what the whole world yearns for.

Time for Africa

There is another piece of African wisdom that I believe is equally applicable to the times we are living in.

The concept of 'African time' is often used in a light-hearted manner to poke fun at an individual for lack of punctuality. But there is a profound additional meaning that one can derive from the concept of African time.

Haraka haraka, haina baraka is an ancient Swahili proverb which, loosely translated, means 'hurrying doesn't bring blessings'.

The pandemic with its protracted lockdowns plus the inevitable reflection on our fragility and mortality, has for many people had a profound impact on our perception of time and how we use it.

Instead of simply racing through life, neglecting the things we truly value, African wisdom dictates that we cherish the time we have and invest it wisely.

This dovetails beautifully with another well-known African proverb: *If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together.*

May we all make time for each other and 'go together' this Africa Month.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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