

Apata Ganga And The Leadership Challenge: The Role Of Alumni In Restoring The Lost Glory Of Our Secondary Schools In Nigeria, GCI As A Case Study.

Good afternoon Mr President and distinguished members of the Executive Committee of GCIOBA, most respected schoolmates, ladies and gentlemen.

Please let me begin by thanking the organizing committee for its choice of the subject of this lecture which to my mind is aimed at addressing about the most crucial and strategic need of our time. I have been asked to speak about the role of alumni in restoring the lost glory of secondary schools in Nigeria using our beloved GCI as a case study.

Calling so pointedly for self-reflection on our alumni and the role it can and should play in the restoration of the quality of secondary school education and by extension education in general, I will be exploring the subject through the lens of our unique GCI essence and from this point of view, I will extract what should be our corporate guiding directive in a sub-theme that I have titled: Apata Ganga and the Leadership Challenge.

May I note that it may well be fortuitous that we are finally convening for this lecture which was billed to take place in November last year, after the year has looped one additional cycle to 2020.

The shifts in dates for convening until finally today, have certainly afforded us the opportunity to experience first hand, the effects of the accelerating complexities that we face as a people by the day.

None of these however, may be as topical as the phenomenon that is seeing the world reeling from the most catastrophic public health challenge in a century - COVID 19; a challenge that has come with the widest ramifications for anyone on earth today.

To say that the effect of this pandemic extends beyond public health into economic, socio-political and environmental dimensions is stating the obvious.

The times therefore call for nothing short of a new kind of man- the explorer man with the capability for creating new understanding from the ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty that unfamiliar situations present. For, at no other time in history has the human soul needed to embrace the higher values that we were taught at the school on the hill as now.

Education for this scenario is now the new memorandum as it builds the capacity for inquiry, choice selectivity and competent decision-making.

Exploration also denotes leadership, for leadership is to go ahead of others to clear new pathways for taking people from present unsatisfactory contexts into better ones.

It is in this light that I contemplate the years of our lives spent at School, and “School” in reference here is the one with a capital “S”, and by which I mean Government College Ibadan, as those who know, know.

I am always moved by the perennial treasure of the memories and emotions that the spirit of this great institution branded in our hearts, which validates the theory that brands are emotions, memories and soul, more important than the physical assets of products or entities. It is the reason that I hardly think about the physical infrastructure when GCI comes to my mind. School had a spirit that is simply inimitable and unforgettable.

What I ask in these times of contemplation is whether the deeper meaning of the GCI brand in reference is being brought to life in the larger context of Nigeria, the geopolitical entity into which fortune and time brought the founding fathers to live out their lives when they founded our school in 1929.

So what is this essential meaning of Government College Ibadan, that I’m speaking about?

As we all know, the founding father, Mr (later to be) Sir Selwyn Macgregor Grier, then Director of Education for the Southern Provinces of Nigeria, conceived the idea of the school and recruited the collaboration of Mr E. R. Swanston, Regional Inspector of Education and jointly, they established Government College, Ibadan. We cannot appraise the import of their endeavour without

appreciating the genius locus, the spirit - beyond the physical infrastructure, buildings, dormitories, classrooms, sports facilities, - that inhabited the minds of these founding fathers, and which they brought to bear on shaping the peculiar man that is a GCI Boy.

It is in this that we will find the meaning of Government College Ibadan; its real, or what should be its ideal import to the world, especially at this time.

Yes, GCI has had the distinction of being the most prestigious school in Western Nigeria since its founding. But primacy, power and respect for status quo, as an advantage in reckoning the relevance of people or institutions is in decline, in a world where technology is democratizing access to instruments of development and facilitating new entrants into every sphere, everywhere.

This means that there is now a multilateralism of power and the world cannot stop for anyone; neither does respect for past achievements matter that much!

Our search for this meaning of GCI, may reveal that the powerful convergence of metaphor and geography, as we have in our case, is beyond coincidence. The metaphor, “a school set on a hill” is imbued with the spiritual quantum of an elevated position from which pours the limitless benefits and advantages of education; more like valuable water flowing out of a fountain to a patched surrounding lowland.

This is the reason for my so-crafted sub theme to the title of our lecture today ... “Apata Ganga and the Leadership Challenge”

Apata Ganga is not only self-reflective in the gravitas of the onomatopoeia- Ganga, meaning gargantuan and Apata meaning mountain. It is a metaphor for the elevated position that our school should hold in the national or even global consciousness. Herein lies our identity.

A journey back to our roots, will reveal that the vocation of the visionary founder, being an administrator of education means that we were forged by the spirit that recognizes the primacy of education as the bedrock for human development.

To this end, the quintessential GCI boy should be the derivative of alchemy - transmuted to an elixir for his world to ingest and get cured from its prevailing malady, at whatever time that he lives.

I hold the strong view that in discussions around the reformation of schools, the premium placed on physical infrastructure over the quality of the infrastructure of the mind, is misplaced. All through time, human civilization and phenomenal development in society have always been propelled by the superior quality of the infrastructure of the minds of the leaders of such societies.

So when I say that the GCI Boy was born to lead, the assertion is not coming out of conceit, but an affirmation of

the imperative for us to validate our reason for being, as people favored above many that did not have the fortune- with its advantages- of being in the academy.

The point being made here is that GCI was and should continue to be a mountain where students are equipped with the resources required for elevated thinking and thereafter released to serve society, thereby freeing it from the myre of ignorance and underdevelopment, occasioned by poor leadership.

So, name should converge with character, to be deliberately lived out in spirit;

“Government” equates leadership

“College” equates the concept of the academy - an institution of learning and mind elevation.

“Apata Ganga” equates the conceptual outpost from whose elevated position, superior ideas are framed, for impact on a global scale.

At no time is this needed more as our nation grapples with the challenge of global competitiveness and relevance.

Remember that at the foundation of School, Ibadan was the host city for research and development in West Africa - and GCI fed that fountain.

Dear Schoolmates, this is our DNA. And the only validation for the existence of our Alumni is to manifest this identity. If this is not a heritage to be sought after, cherished and built upon, then nothing else is.

So, if the alumni are seen located atop powerhouses in the professions, businesses and academic institutions of global influence as we have today, it is no wonder.

The question to however ask is how are we using this elevated status as a pulpit from which the apostolic credentials for future-forward thinking are propagated and actualized?

The school on the hill, founded by a Director of Education, actually set the stage in earning for Ibadan, the distinction of becoming the epicenter of education in Nigeria, out of which the seismic tremors of knowledge continue to ripple through board rooms, law courts, hospitals and thought centers today.

Is it also any wonder that the first Nobel Laureate of Literature to emerge from Africa, had to have come through Government College Ibadan?
The answer is “No wonder”!

It therefore may not be mere serendipity that all through time and in more than a few cases, man has had to ascend hills to receive resource for driving the progress of peoples and their world. Please reflect on the many famous geographical hilltops as in Davos, the high elevation in the Alps, Mount Zion, the high elevation in Jerusalem, Arafat in Saudi Arabia and many others. It is all about receiving insight and attaining clarity of perspective directly from the source, unencumbered by the shades that becloud the plains. That is why all leaders

who went up came down to the people transformed, their faces shining with spiritual light for solutions to illuminate the darkness that beclouded the circumstances of their day.

So, what is the secret sauce that is this our mountain? It is critical thinking; the quality that differentiates the leader from the follower in their influence and impact on society.

Literature about our school states that “students were required to complete a number of core courses in the arts and sciences. The courses were designed so that all students, no matter what their strengths were, obtained the basic skills of critical thinking, effective writing, effective oral communication, library literacy, laboratory competency, creative thinking and problem solving”.

Today, we need this secret sauce to take us beyond our stated quest of merely restoring “lost glory”. We must go beyond the past, for there is a future to be won.

The charge is acceleration and advancement, so existential flexibility marked by the ability, capacity and agility to adapt and be predictive by anticipating change is called for.

The sentiment of alumni associations which have always tended to concentrate on taking their school back to the old times, with the times of their tenure as points of reference is, to my mind, where we miss it.

This is a sentiment that causes a lot of the older generation much pain and the younger generation much fear and confusion.

So, no!

Restoration is not enough. The past is what it is. Past. We should extend our thinking above and beyond. The true essence of GCI is that the school should be the causative factor for all things that have a phenomenal impact on the progression of society. The key word is progression. Man and society must continuously progress. Considering this essence, which has always been about promoting the advance of society, reminiscences of past times, good as they are, should not make us succumb to being fossilised in time, while the world advances. And is the world advancing!

Definitely so. And much faster than our ability to catch up, as evidenced by the appalling state of Nigeria's global competitiveness in any sphere of human endeavor.

This therefore, is the reason why we should think ahead and not think of taking anything and more importantly Government College Ibadan back to what it used to be; but forward to a more glorious future. Just like God said to Joshua in the holy book, "Moses my servant is dead. You move on and take new territory".

We have a war to win, because the world does not stand still for the undetermined to catch up.

Society, on its inexorable journey is now in the post-digital age.

This is the age that has framed an emergent digital economy, the result being incredible economic output arising from the influence of digital technology. The age though still young, has also had tremendous influence in determining the requisite knowledge that individuals and

businesses must have, if they are to be relevant, successful and future-proofed to thrive.

This is why it should now be a directive principle that we ensure that our school can fulfil and live its essence by being not only a lightening rod but an activator of new thinking and processes exercised through the development of human capital to get Nigeria ahead in this new age.

Having posited that the current endowment and fund-raising initiatives have proven insufficient in dealing with the multifaceted and systemic issues that are responsible for the sorry state of education in our country, what next can we do?

I ask this because only fresh perspectives are needed today as the matter of development for our nation seems to be so perplexing that we are beginning to see a curious confusion or even disdain for the very necessity of education itself.

It may not look immediately obvious that our society is on the brink of implosion, with all the consequences that are too frightening to ponder or mention now but it is apparent that we are unfortunately getting there. We have had a taster of how the now seeming inevitable uprising against government and all its real and perceived agencies has played out. What happens next may not be beautiful to contemplate, as what was dubbed the #ENDSARS protest is toe-in-water for the people who are desirous of #ENDEVERYTHING, as they do not see themselves #ENJOYINGANYTHING. The elite advantage received by

the opportunity at GCI compels us to help in pulling society back from the brink, in the short time that there is.

Where to start is halting the current relentless assault on education. I will exemplify this with the extremely alarming statement credited to a popular former trade unionist and former Chairman of a major party which effectively excluded people in the professions outside the categorisation of career politics from being recognised as being of any use in setting the direction for the progress of Nigeria.

Hear him: "the educated and elitist persons are not good for governance as they are disconnected from the people". This top Nigerian was said to have made this statement at the national secretariat of his party, while x-raying the credentials of his party's governorship aspirants and submitted that "one can hardly see professors governing". More than a strategic assault on the value of education, this position is foreboding of the reality that it will take a brutal fight between intellect and demagoguery right now, if our society is to have any chance of survival.

It is the famous Hollywood actor, Morgan Freeman who posited that, "maybe if we underpaid politicians and overpaid teachers, there would be smarter people and less shitty laws".

I agree with him.

The blame for this latter day disdain for education should lie somewhere; the dysfunction of the products of education in the last forty years!

This is why I am in agreement with one distinguished alumnus of Edo College Benin, who I professionally collaborate with that we need a platform for advocacy and

engagement on this issue of education at the most strategic source.

And that is at the place of policy.

The purpose of governance is to ideate philosophical constructs for architecting functional, liveable, progressive and happy societies. We can see why the founding fathers of GCI are quintessential examples of people who understood and were committed to their purpose. We can also see the reason why the word “Government” prefixes the word “College” in our name. Education governs. If constructs frame thinking on which institutions for governance are built, is it not clear therefore that the quality of education is fundamental and directly proportional to the quality of life of the people?

This is why the engagement with Government on education has become inevitable and urgent. We need to create the construct or thought for a special purpose vehicle for holistic solutions to the seemingly intractable and daunting ogre of the systemic incapability of the present educational system to take us out of the present paralysis.

This proposed initiative must be a think-tank that actively and collaboratively works with governments to carry out research and develop policies for implementation in the area of human capital development.

The ballooning population of our country holds more potential for crises than opportunity for growth and development, if intentional solutions are not designed for

outcome-based learning as against the current directionless, purpose-lacking, generic and poorly manned system of education. We need to be mindful of how the paucity of production and productivity have attained proportions that are now threatening our economic and consequently, social order. To leapfrog and become competitive again, Nigeria needs to harness and convert our peculiar strength in human and natural resources to competitive advantage.

In its operation, this think-tank of the 'school on a hill' should assume the form of a multidisciplinary laboratory that keeps designing structures, strategies, policies and learning relevant for domain rule in every area. Very much like the emergent concept of phenomena-based learning, where the focus of instruction is directed at solving real-world problems and anticipated challenges, rather than the obtuse propagation of generic and obsolete knowledge.

I propose that we be the first alumni association to institute and fund this think-tank, for now called the GCI Lab, designed as a purpose-built lab, fit for both thought and practice as a model for the required engagement with governments on policy design for human capital development.

From this proposed think tank, and with a distinguished Board of Governors, world class resident and visiting scholars as well as readers, experiments later translated into policies would be constantly in production on how to

train for the requisite talents as well as models and structures to produce outcomes that are relevant to the contexts of the time and environment. The researches and articulated solutions will be coalesced into positions from which a structured engagement with Government will be established and sustained.

As a first step in establishing the think tank, we will need to institutionalise a well funded standing secretariat, situated right in the school premises at Apata Ganga.

Government College Ibadan, the school will then be redesigned, funded and rebuilt to play the role of the 'demonstration school', i.e the crucible for testing the principles of the new thinking that constantly come out of the GCI Lab.

The critical importance of this lab is the opportunity it provides for positively affecting society as we will be “broadcasting” to affect educational and human capital development in Nigeria as a whole, as against narrowcasting to our school alone.

It needs no telling that without a holistic solution, the problems we are trying to solve for our school as an individual unit will keep showing up in the wider matrix of the society in which we live, source employees for our businesses and seek our peace and general prosperity.

We have to break codes much like in orthopedic practice, to reset for outcome-based learning that reformats the mind to be able to do two things. One, the ability to translate thinking into meaning and the other, the ability to achieve a desired outcome.

Only then can we tool for solutions of the future.
To bring this to life, I posit that we need an Education Summit featuring world-class leaders and thinkers in education, development and economics funded and organised by our Alumni Association.

I should be quick to admit that the grounds we are proposing to tread can be very daunting. But can we all also see, that the very nature of our challenge with the current state of education cannot, and I repeat, cannot be solved without the discipline of design thinking; a designer's approach to problem solving? This requires intuition and systemic reasoning.

Tortuous as any strategy for a holistic policy approach to our challenge may be, I am of the firm belief that great as the emotional and financial efforts by associations of Old Students in individual schools have been, these initiatives have hardly shown any commendable national impact as the issues that have brought our nation to the sorry state of development are essentially systemic and policy-deficient.

This is what the challenge for the “school on the hill” should mean and address...come up higher and beyond and lead by being at the forefront with solutions adequate and appropriate to the perplexing state of education that is askance on just about any parameter, whether in pedagogy or the relevance of content in meeting the needs of society in this post-digital age.

By seriously taking on this challenge, we will become the shining exemplar of solution providers. The validation for man as the constant factor in the inexorable progression of his existence on earth is that even though situations do arise that can bring the sunset on the institutions that make society thrive, the thinking man is constantly able to change the game, by engaging with unconventional strategies.

Everytime I agonise over this burden of enlightened leadership, a charge that is familiar to us keeps coming up.

So I ask you; do the following lines that eloquently encapsulate the burden of our school motto, "Learning To Serve", sound familiar in the following charge?

I quote:

"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand.

Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven".

Of course, you recognize that quote as the Sermon on the mount

GCI must be re-designed to show that light. The need for new thinkers- philosophers and imagineers in Nigeria that

hold the answers for the therapy for the soul of society in uncertain times is urgent. We need people who can engage the synthesis for thinking and doing. For wisdom has not absconded from a human mind and soul that is trained to understand the times and its needs. And at no time has any problem come, which solution will not come from man.

If we believe that no other time in the history of our nation challenges the purpose of our education which is 'Learning To Serve' as now, we should also remember that GCI prepared us for such a time as this.

Will you bring your light?
I have mine. I here pledge 10% of my annual salary paid in advance by the third month of every year as long as I am in employment to the proposed GCI Lab. An endowment plan post my active years of employment and...after will be presented to the executive committee. I thank you for listening.

Jimi Awosika
Swanston House

Music: This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...