

Retreat on “Intellectual Leadership and the African Information Society”  
June 2003, Addis Ababa

## **The Asymmetric Joist**

*In the days of old when minds were bold and the Internet was not invented, the knights could joist assured that their cerebral lances were of equal lengths. In them days, the gentlemanly act of the intellectual joist was a measured spar, with more or less equally matched opponents. The thrust and parry of concepts, hypothesis, thesis and ideas, while circumscribed by space and time, was universally accepted as medium for the full contact sport of ideas grappling for supremacy.*

*Within a short a time a winner would emerge, and the victorious cerebral knight would dismount from his dashing white charger to the thunderous acclaim of his peers and all; secure in victory, at least until the next great idea comes galloping down, lance at the ready, spoiling for a joist.*

*Not so these days, thanks to Information Technology. Whilst our hapless knight of yore is joisting with windmills, waiting to see the red of the enemy’s eyes and bracing for the rush of that first contact of intellectual battle, he his struck down by an unseen enemy. A precision guided intellectual missile, set off by drone flying some twenty miles to the West vaporizes our befuddled knight. All that is left is the charred twisted helmet that once contained the intellectual capital of an even more confused continent.*

*Welcome to the new face of battle, welcome to The Asymmetric Joist.*

**THOUGHT PIECE BY Tunji Lardner**  
**Lagos, June 2003**

## **AFRICA’S INTELLECTUAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT**

### **PREAMBLE**

The 21st century dynamics is determined and driven by knowledge-based economics. It is an unfolding knowledge economy. The factors of production, the products and the dynamics of the market place are shaping to be radically different from what has existed previously. It will perforce, be an integrated and technologically networked global economy, recasting comparative advantages and discriminating pricing for goods and services.

Within this collective economic future, raw materials and the processing of them into other articles will continue to decrease in value, but knowledge--*that particular element added by humans employing information and judgment*--will increase.

It clearly calls for a different understanding of economics, information and the framing of socio-economic policies, as well as decision-making processes within a radically different intellectual paradigm.

In this brave new world, the economic currency and commodity value will be encapsulated within the information-knowledge continuum (info-knowledge) aided by various ICT/Internet based learning tools.

Against this background is the often quoted observation that **80% of what is known about Africa resides outside Africa, mostly in Western knowledge and cultural institutions.** Addressing this reality is the central challenge of our “Intellectual Leadership and the African Information Society” retreat. And in spite of this handicap, Africa is willy-nilly part of the global market place of ideas, and is increasingly being forced to compete globally.

**Some questions:**

***How can Africa harness this expropriated Intellectual capital and other knowledge asserts for her development? This is the key question for retreat to answer***

I proffer two broad areas of engagement:

**THE RUDIMENTS OF A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY:**

The primary economic commodity is info-knowledge and its economic value is tied to its value-in-use as a function of its applicability, accuracy, timeliness, completeness, ease of use and access. All these qualities are value-enhanced because, information once digitized can be integrated and re-purposed to create new value-added products. The value-in-use is determined by the relevance of info-knowledge to problem solving and its capacity to effectively address and tame the uncertainties of the market place.

The Human Resource/Intellectual Capacity nexus is of special relevance to Africa. While the two are joined at the hip, they are not necessarily Siamese twins. Human resource, i.e. labor as a factor of production, is the intermediary stage of the development of info-knowledge as a product. Because of the intangible nature of the product, authorship is becoming increasingly marginal to the requirements of the end user. With or without African participation, valuable info-knowledge about Africa will continue to be produced and traded with out royalties to Africans.

The key is for Africans to provide their own content, re-purpose info-knowledge and effectively trade and collect royalties on the global information market place.

**INFO-KNOWLEDGE AS TOOLS FOR AFRICA’S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:**

Most of Africa has full INTERNET connectivity. With this as a metaphor for the continent’s connection with the rest of the world, will come the economic necessity to fully maximize the benefits of instantaneous and real time info-knowledge.

These capacities if fully harnessed will render obsolete old ideas about national political and economic sovereignties. It can only serve to strengthen existing regional economic arrangements and ultimately a pan-African economic union. And for such a union to thrive, it must concentrate and consolidate on the one hand, intra-African trade, and on the other fully participate in the world financial and commodity markets.

On a secondary level, the development of Africa's formal private economic sectors, especially the growing list of countries publicly trading stocks in respective stock exchanges, are signs that the free market philosophy is now squarely within the economic realm and no longer subject to ideological debate.

If this presages Africa's emergence as the next and last economic frontiers, as things stand, it is clear that national governments will have little understanding or control over the domestic impacts of global market-place imperatives.

***The next question is how can Africa play on the global market place without losing socio-economic control and accrued info-knowledge profit to the vagaries of the global market-place?***

The great paradox of the African situation is that to survive in the 21st century, the continent must rapidly interface with the technology driven nodes of the age, while concurrently living out the intermediate stages of humanity's great epochs. Essentially, Africa's past co-exists in a developmental time warp along with her present and possibly her future.

By this, I mean that arguable, Africa exists simultaneously in an AGRARIAN--PRE-INDUSTRIAL--INDUSTRIAL and INFORMATION age. An interesting continuum that has to be fully understood and managed before the continent can make that necessary quantum leap into the 21st century. Another interesting corollary is the concept of today's Africa as occupying more than a geographic space. Beyond the dark overcast of a despairing geographic Africa, exists in the various Diasporas and neo-Diasporas, a vibrant, colorful, creative, technology savvy and enterprising intellectual space that is waiting to be fully explored and engaged.