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EMBRACED BLACKNESS IS A PROUD STRIDE TOWARDS EXCELLENCE

I once read from somewhere about the story of a sculptor who was sweating and meticulously carving an idol for a temple. A foreigner is said to have passed by and noticed that there was a finished identical idol on the ground, while the sculptor was working on a second. The foreigner enquired if the sculptor needed two same-looking idols for his project. The sculptor stated that he needed only one, but the first sculpture got damaged in the final stages of the work. Amazed, the foreigner said he saw no damage on the sculpture lying neglected on the ground, to which the sculptor drew his attention to some scratch on the nose. Still unconvinced, the foreigner wanted to know where the sculpture would be displayed. The sculptor indicated that it would be mounted on a pillar about 6 metres high. The foreigner could not believe the foolishness of the artist and told him that nobody would know that there is a scratch on that sculptor if mounted that high. "I would know", responded the sculptor.

The liberation struggle is a classroom where the value of excellence is taught to the people. We are taught that we should strive for excellence against all the odds imposed upon us by the shackling conditions of landlessness, colonialism, racism and slavery. It is about making the best of the worst situation on the part of the people. For a people fighting for liberation, excellence is not just the destination, but an organic part of the journey towards the destination. That is why the struggling masses are prepared to die now in the journey in order to free excellence that would lead us to greater excellence at the point of our destination.

Landlessness and racism have poisoned the minds of Black people to mistakenly think that excellence and Blackness can never go together. We are in fact miseducated to believe that Blackness is devoid of excellence, when the genesis and evolution of human excellence is to be found in Blackness whose original habitat was Afrika. We all know that Afrika is not only the cradle of humankind, but the domain where the great civilisations of humanity originated and thrived at the dawn of history. Landlessness, colonialism, racism and slavery were systems or conditions that were devised by the anti-Black world to unsettle and negate the momentum of Black Excellence.

When the government does not deliver stationery in Black schools in time, they are confirming the racist stereotype that Black people are good for nothing. We cannot take care of our own children whom we keep on reminding that they are leaders of tomorrow. "Why should we wait to lead tomorrow when there are no leaders for today?", the "Young, Gifted and Black" folks should be asking themselves. When some Black teachers choose to go to work drunk, and sometimes absent themselves, they must know that they are collaborating with the shackles to further bruise the limbs of Black Excellence and deny it mobility. We should never condone the betrayal of Black Excellence even by structural conditions like overcrowding. A teacher whose job is to cognitively and intellectually nurture Black children should never be so fatalistic as to yield to the restraining conditions like the unfavourable teacher-learner ratio. This holds true for Black health practitioners. Liberate your Black Excellence and do the right thing for your people.

When Black people continue to wallow in poverty and be condemned to shelters (not houses) like shacks even this side of democracy, the government is giving credence to the lifetime caricature of Black people as subhuman beings that are not worthy of living in human settlements.

Every Black person or professional has to develop a positive attitude of knowing that wherever they are, they are in the struggle for the good of the Black folks that were, by design, denied resources and opportunities to liberate and develop their humanity to restore their dignity as a people. If you are a teacher, teach that child as if they were your own biological children in order to liberate that trapped Black Excellence in them. If some Black football players have cited culture as part of the contributing factors to their failure to succeed in foreign leagues, that should make us wonder what negative contribution culture can make in failure of Black students to adapt in the generally white tertiary institutions of learning. The teaching language is foreign. The anecdotes cited by the lecturer (who is usually white) to help teaching make sense, have no cultural connection with the Black students. Even when the Black student consults the white lecturer in his or her office, the conversation is visited by an uneasy relational tension and cultural distance. The situation is more relaxed and welcoming when a white student visits a white lecturer in their office. Even before they get into the reason for the visit, the lecturer asks the student about his father and further wonder if the farming business is still doing well. This relational tension permeates almost all professions where the client is Black, and the service provider is white.

To unlock and nurture Black Excellence, Afrikan culture must be systematically interwoven into every sphere of life in our Afrikan society. Black people must never be the ones that struggle to fit into their own society. If the society is theirs, Black people should never be taught how to fit into their own society. Put differently, Black people should never be trained to fit into themselves. It is against this setup that Biko made the profound statement: "If by integration you understand a breakthrough into white society by blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behaviour set up and maintained by whites, then YES I am against [integration]".

The message about the sculptor is directed to Black people as they strive to connect with the envisioned self. Everything we do has to speak of our humanity and dignity. Through our thoughts and actions, we must make a bold and determined move to liberate the Black Excellence that weeps to be free in an anti-Black world. At the risk of sounding essentialist, if Black Excellence is the Original Excellence, then Black people must reject any blurring accolades that recognise our hard work and excellence under the

demeaning phrase “the first black” this and that. Black Excellence must be viewed in its own right and paradigms.

Whatever we do, whether we are teaching or learning, ministering or worshipping, Black people must shun all mediocrity that is reflective of living under conditions of landlessness and racism for centuries and generation after generation. We must demonstrate the human, moral and intellectual resilience to reinvent ourselves in the midst of adversity. Nobody else, but we must be the harshest critics of ourselves as Black people. We must be the first to expose laziness and shoddiness in our own work. It does not matter the cost in the work or resources, we must be the first to reject and discard the sculpture that is lacking in quality. Even if the whole world does not see the scratch on the nose, we shall discard the inadequate sculpture because we are the ones who know about the blemish of the scratched nose.