

## A Nigeria without oil

Written by Philip Emeagwali  
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### Part 3 of 5

*Excerpt from Nigeria's 50th anniversary lecture at the Embassy of Nigeria, Paris. . Lecture video and audio are posted at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1mCIXleezY>*

I wish to look back to 1960, and forward to 2060, to share my thoughts about the challenges to, and opportunities for, building a stronger Nigeria through technology. In the past 50 years, Nigeria has grown economically stronger through its use of technology to discover and then recover petroleum. Fifty years ago, Nigeria had only one oil well. Fifty years later, that first oil well is empty and abandoned. Do the math: "How many oil wells will Nigeria have left in 50 years?"

Empty oil wells are not abstract, intangible things. They're as concrete as Nigeria's first oil well: the Oloibiri well, that now exists only on postcards. We treat our oil wells like we treat snails: We take the flesh and leave the shell. And we leave the shell for our children, and they leave it for their children, who will earn income by converting it into a tourist attraction.

Fifty-year-old oil wells are drying up everywhere, from Nigeria to Saudi Arabia to Russia. Perhaps in 50 years, Nigeria will no longer be one of the twelve members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

Our petroleum was formed millions of years ago, when our pre-human ancestors crawled on four legs. And today we've discovered nearly all the oil that can be discovered. Yet Nigeria's future is being written by its few oilfields. Oil revenues account for 80 percent of Nigeria's budget. The nagging question is: What will we do when that 80 percent is gone? What is our Plan B when our Plan A fails? Searching for more oil is not the answer.

These are tough questions that we prefer to ignore but our children must answer. To prepare

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our future leaders for "a world without oil," I advise newspapers and schools to sponsor essay competitions that ask,

**"If you're an editor who's been informed that the last oil well in Nigeria has dried up, what headline would you use and what would you say in your editorial?"**

I posed this same question to my friends and they e-mailed these headlines:

1. "The Goose is Dead."
2. "The End of Nigeria's Curse."
3. "Oil Tanks Exhausted, Think Tanks Needed."

I am forming a think tank that addresses futuristic questions, such as: "What are the challenges to, and opportunities for, a Nigeria without oil?" The answer lies within the soil of our minds. If we do not understand our past we are bound to repeat our mistakes. Africa's history is more than dusty facts and faded images.

Once upon a time, West Africa was on par with Europe in terms of intellectual capital and development. Ten centuries before Christopher Columbus set sail for the Americas and Mungo Park sought the course of the River Niger, Timbuktu loomed large in the European imagination as one of the most mysterious and remote places on Earth. Timbuktu, which emerged from the River Niger, was a metaphor for the end of the ancient world.

Timbuktu was great not because of its petroleum reserves, but because of its unsurpassed intellectual capital and the collective knowledge and wisdom of its people. Nigeria will join the world's top 20 economies, not because of its petroleum revenues but through the technological knowledge of future generations.

For Nigeria to join the top twenty economies, it must turn its brain drain into brain gain. As a center of intellectual excellence, Timbuktu attracted the best brains and inspired the ancient West African proverb:

"Salt comes from the north, gold from the south, and silver from the country of the white man, but the word of God and the treasures of truth are found only in Timbuktu. "

For Nigeria to build the Timbuktu of tomorrow and become a top twenty economy, it must control critical technologies, and not merely purchase them. It must turn its brain into brain gain. Nigeria needs men and women of ideas, technological visionaries and futurists, to help its people answer the larger question of who they are, where they've been, and where they want to go.

It was Britain's superior maritime technology that enabled it to shape Africa's destiny with over 500 years of slave trading and colonization. Slave trade led to brain drain needed for growth while colonization yielded brain gain that increased development.

While the United States was beginning to profit from the brain drain flowing from Europe and Africa, Timbuktu was being physically and intellectually sacked by Moroccan invaders and slave traders from the Americas. Timbuktu lost the human capital needed for growth and development

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and never recovered as a center of intellectual excellence.

Technology will allow Nigeria to do more with less, without depleting its natural resources, but with greater reliance on technology. The future is for us to create, but first we must outline our vision.

Foot soldiers, not generals, will lead our war against ignorance. The foot soldiers are our 100 million young Nigerians whose weapon is knowledge. Their collective intellectual capital will enable them to build a stronger Nigeria using technology knowledge. My 50-year vision for Nigeria is to tap into the creativity and innovation of our young people. Our young people have the potential to uplift humanity.

Technology is all around us and we humans are constantly inventing and reinventing new tools, techniques, and technologies. Our journey of discovery to the frontier of science reaffirms humanity's goal to endlessly search for new knowledge, and to demand more of itself and its people.

Philip Emeagwali has been called “a father of the Internet” by CNN and TIME, and extolled as a “Digital Giant” by BBC and as “one of the great minds of the Information Age” by former U.S. President Bill Clinton. He won the 1989 Gordon Bell Prize, the Nobel Prize of supercomputing, for reprogramming 65,000 subcomputers as an internet that helps recover more oil.