



AFRICA IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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EDITORS

INTELLECTUALS AND AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

Pretension and Resistance in African Politics



Predicament and response: an introduction

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What went wrong?

What went wrong? What is the way out? Progressives in Africa keep debating and agonizing over the failure of the forces on the ground to advance the material, social and political welfare of the continent, 'the African predicament'. This collection discusses in Part One the response of some of Africa's leading intellectuals-cum-writers: Soyinka, Ngugi, Achebe. They have made powerful statements of outrage and disgust at the betrayal of popular aspirations committed by Africa's political leaders. The writers have their own visions that point in dramatically different directions. Do they provide a way out? Can they be combined? The book looks also at a very different, more sordid type of aspiring 'intellectuals', the military men who have been in power for much of the post-independence period and who have grabbed for the pen in order to justify their own misrule. Part Two looks at the way in which other segments of African societies have responded. It is particularly concerned with students and young people, who are often considered the hope for the future. What answers do they provide? The collection contrasts the visions and admonitions of the 'intellectuals' with the multiple and often ambiguous responses of the youths and students. It is not necessarily encouraging. Some of the latter - 'the hopes of the nation' - have given up all hope for their countries and desperately want to get out, aspiring to reach the presumably 'greener pastures' of Europe and North America. But there are also those who valiantly confront a repressive, corrupt and backward state and struggle for national redemption. Of course, the radical intellectual critics demonstrate that the cards continue to be heavily stacked in favour of neo-colonial and imperialist forces and their local collaborators. But, as argued in this collection, there are also new, seemingly more benevolent forms of foreign interventions in support of 'civil society' and 'civic education' that similarly stifle the emergence of popular democratic alternatives.

This book is primarily concerned with the world-views and strategies of these various social agents, the writers and towering intellectual giants, the self-justifying soldiers, the students with their multiple strategies of resistance or escape, and the 'civic educators' who reinforce inequity and serve global strategies of control. It concludes, however, by looking at ourselves as academics and researchers concerned with interpreting all this. Who has the *locus standi*, and who, as a scholar, has the right to pronounce on Africa's development? How is our perspective affected by the way in which we are situated as 'insiders' and 'outsiders'? It is argued that 'location' matters, where you come from, how you are situated in relation to the issues at stake. Ultimately, however, whether as an academic or as an activist, what is decisive is how you choose to relate to the communities, the local forces on the ground, and their aspirations for a better life.

There is a glaring gap between the hopes and aspirations of the anti-colonial struggles and the realities of the post-colonial world with its authoritarian one-party or military rulers, ethno-nationalist crises, collapsed economies, political instability, unemployment and deepening mass poverty. Although the anti-colonial movement has turned its anger against neo-colonialism, in many cases, the new regimes have merely accentuated the repressive and anti-democratic character of colonial rule. Increasingly indebted and poor, African nations depend on loans from international finance institutions and aid from foreign donor agencies. Such loans carry conditions that make nonsense of Africa's presumed independence. An early generation of African intellectuals like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Cameron Dudou, Femi Osofisan and Claude Ake exposed an independence that had failed to liberate the people. To them, development after formal independence was colonialism clad in local apparel. They opposed neo-colonialism and national misrule and wanted to rebuild Africa in line with ideals that had inspired the anti-colonial struggle. Of course, 'intellectuals' would not all agree. While some were concerned with the problems of national development, others channelled their energies towards more sectarian or professedly 'non-political' ends. The messages of prominent writers discussed in the first part of this collection are all concerned with the fate of the nation. Their writings are infused with the ideas, traditions, hopes and aspirations of the communities from which they emerge and they seek to influence the course of action

taken by the people. There is an obvious connection between literature and politics in the pursuit of ethics, social order and national development. Indeed, literature is a site where the shining promises and deep disappointments of Africa's post-colonial history are confronted most graphically.

Intellectuals and soldiers

In *A Play of Giants* (discussed here by Olusegun Adekoya), Wole Soyinka furiously berates the extremities of 'personalized' rule as represented by megalomaniac leaders such as Idi Amin in Uganda, Emperor Bokassa in the Central African Republic, Macias Nguema in Equatorial Guinea and Mobutu in Zaire. Soyinka responds to the outrageous politics of these nation-wreckers with hilarious and bloody satire. He exposes their violent intolerance of opposition and their urge to perpetuate themselves in power. Their all-consuming obsession with suspected threats to their own persons poses an acute threat to 'national development' and society as a whole. In Soyinka's world, the 'giants' – a caricature of known African despots – are committed to bizarre political posturing and rely on power acquired and sustained solely through violent coercion. It allows them to stay in power in spite of the disasters they inflict on the progress and stability of their nations. Their disastrous misrule is facilitated by the support they draw from gullible or opportunistic 'intellectuals' from within and from outside who provide the phoney philosophical rationale for their excesses. In the Cold War era, such intellectuals courted allies for authoritarian regimes from both sides of the warring blocs. Adekoya points to the inevitability of chaos when the democratic aspirations of the people are brutalized.

As discussed in M. S. C. Okolo's essay, other celebrated African writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are equally dismayed by gross misrule and failed nationhood. More overtly didactic than Soyinka, however, they blend a stark critique of African society, rooted in historically conscious literary creations, with a vision of viable alternative routes to national emancipation. While Achebe believes in 'reform' as a means of transforming the continent, Ngugi is disposed towards revolutionary action. Okolo offers a philosophical analysis of these juxtaposed political discourses, adding her own reflections and preferences. Philosophy, she argues, like literature, is a tool of social

inquiry aimed at enhancing man's consciousness of being and universe. **Both disciplines engage in speculations as well as critical evaluations** of existing social conditions, sometimes offering suggestions towards the reordering of society. In discussing Achebe's and Ngugi's contributions, Okolo argues the case for a 'third path' to development outside the reform and revolution that are envisaged in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*. Such an alternative way to social transformation, she argues, is to be constructed from where such models intersect.

It is widely agreed that the soldiers, just like the politicians whom they often violently displaced, offered no respite from the ills plaguing the continent, despite their efforts to inscribe themselves in people's consciousness as risking their own comfort to 'save the nation'. While the evidence of their actual performance has served to demystify the uniformed men in power, many have engaged in conscious efforts to perpetuate the myth through a form of narratives which Gbemisola Adeoti in his contribution, 'Narrating the Green Gods', calls 'an exercise in self-rewriting'. This refers to the genre of life narrative – autobiography, biography and memoirs – which in Nigeria has become increasingly popular among the military men who have held political office. The trend is for soldiers to write or get someone to document their life history, career development and adventures in power. Such works are usually launched with pomp and pageantry, often consuming state money that rightfully should be used in the service of the people. In this fashion, there is pretence towards intellectualism, as they seek to 'reinvent' themselves in the image of statesmen like Azikiwe, Awolowo and Balewa who had earlier used the genre of life narrative. The narratives tend to reinforce the identity of the soldiers as reluctant 'saviours' prodded by the crises of governance. The evidence from elsewhere has amply demonstrated that they have been more skilled in lining their own pockets than in attending to the well-being of the people.

The soldiers' narratives provide a site that brings crucial knowledge about post-colonial politics and insights into the complexity of power, its mode of acquisition and its (ab)uses. In our efforts to understand the travails of democracy after prolonged military rule, the study of the (auto) biographies of the army officers helps us to grasp the extent to which society has been militarized. Our engagement with the texts, Adeoti warns, needs to be guided by close attention not only to the

substance of the narration, but also to their apparent gaps, omissions and silences, more so as there is abundant evidence available from other sources.

Students, youths and citizens

The often acknowledged poverty of leadership and vision of the older generation of African politicians has reinforced a similarly oft-repeated platitude that the future belongs to the youth. Raising his arms in despair at his fiftieth birthday celebrations in 1984, Wole Soyinka lamented a 'wasted generation' when speaking of the miserable post-independence elites, in fact his own contemporaries. What lies beyond such sweeping denunciation? What becomes of Africa's tomorrow? Who are the agents of transformation? Will today's errors be allowed to stifle the prospects of recovery? Is it possible to construct a genuine future from the frail foundations of the present? What role will youths play? These are critical questions that continue to preoccupy Africa's scholars and intellectuals. They also provide the impetus for the essays in the second part of the book that focus on students and youths, their role in historical struggles for social development, good governance, knowledge and people's empowerment.

Not much encouragement for a national revival seems to be offered by Jude Fokwang's study of the expectations and strategies of young people, 'Ambiguous transitions: mediating citizenship among youth in Cameroon', that commences the second part of the book. He paints a dismal picture of political and economic decay, 'a package of recycled monolithic misrule'. The responses of the young people he has interviewed, mostly university and high school students, are at the most ambiguous in their modes of 'navigating' the troubled terrain. On the one hand, he finds those who seek to insinuate themselves into the political and bureaucratic lifelines of the regime, including the loyalist thugs who are more than ready to beat up those who do not fall into line. On the other hand, there are those who stay out of ruling party politics but seek to mobilize other networks and lines of patronage, often looking to bribe themselves into the heart of the system, the prestigious schools, the well-connected arenas and institutions that allow them to pursue their expectations of personal advancement – although with mixed success. But there is also the growing stratum of students and young people who have decided that they have no future

in the Cameroon and are voting with their feet. They look for escape routes to Europe and North America, exploring all possible avenues, including the lotteries organized by the US authorities for 'DVs', the much sought-after 'Diversity Visas'.

Fokwang's students with their partly cunning, partly desperate 'navigating' in search of a good life contrast sharply with the progressive, politically committed student leaders who fought military dictatorship and structural adjustment as discussed in Björn Beckman's chapter, 'Student radicalism and the national project'. Based on a workshop with past leaders of NANS, the National Association of Nigerian Students, mostly from the 1980s and early 1990s, it tells a rather different story, although the continuous decay of the Nigerian university system, state repression and internal divisions may have produced a student population not very different from that interviewed by Fokwang. NANS has been factionalized and the centre can no longer hold. Students, however, remain the most organized segment of the youth population in most nations. In the Nigerian case, they have been a thorn in the flesh of colonial, neo-colonial and autocratic regimes, although greatly weakened by the upsurge of ethno-religious politics, state repression, cultism and the global ideological shift away from leftist politics. Moreover, the learning situation has been undermined by the decline in students' material welfare and the withdrawal of state funding. However, Nigerian students have demonstrated a continued commitment to the national project, despite their restricted social base. Beckman points to the underlying contradictions that generate renewed attempts to assert both student and national interests that go beyond the pervasive opportunism, despair and commitment to exit options documented by Fokwang.

Harri Englund's contribution, 'Transnational governance and the pacification of youth: civic education and disempowerment in Malawi', is less explicit in its commitment to an alternative agenda. However, its penetrating critique of the ideology and practice of an EU-funded major 'civic education' programme (NICE) in Malawi is clearly informed by a radical democratic commitment and an understanding that things could be otherwise. It is not only in Nigeria that prolonged authoritarianism has severely disempowered the people. In Malawi, under the presidency of Kamuzu Banda, such disempowerment was central to the policies of the state. Ironically, the departure of Banda from power

has not reversed the patriarchal structure, despite the strident rhetoric to the contrary, and Malawian society continues to be permeated by inequality and authoritarianism. NGOs that pretend to be geared towards widening the democratic space wittingly or unwittingly promote the opposite. 'Civic education' that should empower the 'grassroots' reinforces inequality and non-democratic structures. This is the core of Englund's submission.

His focus is on NICE, a major foreign intervention in Malawi politics, with an all-national coverage and some 10,000 volunteers, the 'para-civic educators' (PCEs). Englund shows that the project helps to pacify and de-politicize its cadres and that it provides a means to control popular challenges to the state and the global order. It serves to foster elitist (undemocratic) values, idioms and attitudes that effectively insulate the local cadres from the communities where they operate. Rather than being a counter-force in society, youths are manipulated by their elders. In the case of NICE, there is a strong transnational element to this manipulation that contributes to undemocratic governance. Englund makes several points that are relevant to this volume as a whole, not the least in criticizing an excessive preoccupation with the 'failure of the elites' in the discourse on the African condition. Although presumably committed to 'democracy' and 'civil society', such critics often reproduce the same elitist, non-democratic orientation at that level. Although in no way exculpating the 'national elites', the argument suggests that a broader cross-section of agents and agencies are implicated in 'hijacking democracy and human rights', including powerful foreign ones.

Scholars and people

In exposing the repressive, inegalitarian and undemocratic role of civic education, Englund's point of departure is the perspective of the local communities that are supposed to be its beneficiary. This comes close to Nana Akua Anyidoho's position when she argues in the concluding essay of this volume that what really matters when judging the relevance of a particular piece of research is how it relates to the local communities, as audiences, beneficiaries and agenda setters. The norm that she seeks to apply to her own work contrasts with a dominant preoccupation among African scholars with how one should position oneself in relation to Western academic spaces, that is, the pervasive

controversy over 'outsider' versus 'insider knowledge'. It is prompted by the glaring and debilitating Western domination of intellectual production about Africa. In her contribution, 'Identity and knowledge production in the fourth generation', the controversy is addressed with great care and sophistication. The 'fourth generation' in this context refers to the current generation of African scholars, emerging from the universities in Africa and elsewhere and reflecting on their concern with what contribution they can make not just to 'knowledge' but to the development of the continent and its peoples. The foreign domination of scholarship has preoccupied previous generations of scholars and continues to be intensely debated.

Although reaffirming the importance of nationality, geography, race, gender, etc. in influencing positions, Anyidoho argues that it is less a question of *where* you stand than of what you stand *for*. She discusses the type of knowledge that is being produced, by whom and for whom. Much research is produced by non-African scholars, many with only marginal exposure to African geo-cultural space, and the disjunctions between identity, location and knowledge have important implications for the ways in which the problems of Africa are understood and analysed, including the development of theory and methodology. There is certainly a strong case for more 'authentic' knowledge production about Africa. While recognizing the necessity of African scholars investigating Africa (i.e. 'insider scholarship'), Anyidoho simultaneously emphasizes the multiplicity of identities and the complex ways in which the relevance of scholarship is affected by questions of power and privilege. The problem of 'insiders' versus 'outsiders' has, therefore, in her view, to be situated in relation to these multiple constructions of identity where the ultimate measure of relevance is how you choose to relate to the affected community itself.

The book opens by focusing on powerful statements by leading African intellectuals on what went wrong. It ends by addressing the choices that we, as students of 'the African condition', have to make in order to ensure that our studies are relevant for the peoples of Africa and their search for a way out of the predicament.