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Alexandre Mboukou

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Essay

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Anti-Intellectualism In Contemporary Africa

By Alexandre Mboukou

Today, it is a cliche to say that 1960 was the year of Africa. This notwithstanding, it is no less suitable to argue that since 1960, studies on Africa have grown significantly.

Western political scientists have argued the merit of parliametary democracy (two-party or multi-party system), and the evils of Communism, only to be told by African leaders and intellectuals that Africa perhaps needs different political structures to fit her own historical and cultural experience.

Western economists have, for their part, pleaded the case for the free enterprise system and the capitalist mode of production, only to be confronted with the argument that the centralized and planned economic mode of production is the best way to handle underdevelopment.

Western sociologists have warned African leaders of the great dangers posed by ethnicity and tribalism, only to be rebuked with the notion that the West was to blame for these social ills.

In the midst of all the controversies, perhaps the most constructive presence has been that of the politically and culturally concerned African writer. By virtue of his intellectual mission, the utmostly concerned African writer—novelist, dramatist, or poet—has sought to expose the new evils that have arisen inside the African states.

These few daring African writers have specifically pointed out to the African leaders the evils of corruption, repression, social injustices, and ideological eccentricities.

To date, however, only an infinitesimal number of these few highly principled writers has addressed the issue of anti-intellectualism among the African professional and political elite.

In the developing world, anti-intellectualism, though still a recent phenomenon, is not so much a rejection of Western cultural value imports as it is a byproduct of indolence and complacency.

African writers, such as Henri Lopes and Makouta-Mboukou, have sporadically addressed the issue of the growing phenomenon of anti-intellectualism in the African societies. And East Asian scholars, such as Akhileshwar Jha and Syed Hussein Alatas, went much further by devoting more attention to this issue.

Alatas' *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (1977) was conceived as an attempt to provide an answer to the question "whether a group of functioning intellectuals existed in Malaya." The answer was a categorical, "No." Alatas listed three major factors to rationalize his findings. First and foremost was the misguided educational policies; schools were not geared to produce creative minds. Another major factor was the family impact; home life in Malaya was not conducive to the development of a class of intellectuals. The third major factor was the intellectual inertia prevalent among the educated group.

Another important work is Jha's *Intellectuals at Cross-Roads, The Indian Situation* (1977). It was part of an effort to expose the evils of intellectual stagnation in the Indian society in close contrast with the beneficial handiwork of intellectuals in the fight for freedom in both Asia and Africa, and also in the development of the European societies.

Like Alatas, Jha asked the question whether there was an ongoing intellectual tradition in contemporary Indian society. His answer, also, was a "No." He listed the following as the leading reasons for this stagnation: 1) trust in money-making activities, fair or foul, and also in enjoying the pleasures of life, and 2) pre-occupation with all those aspects of modern life which are anti-intellectual in nature, such as cinema, TV, cabaret wrestling, sports and games.

Roots of Anti-Intellectualism

Anti-intellectualism in contemporary African societies must be associated with, and traced back to, a number of

significant factors, including the "culture" factor and the "profession" factor.

In the first category, enter issues such as writing and reading in African societies prior to the arrival of Europeans. In the second category, one finds issues such as clerical versus military occupations in the colonial days.

The issue of whether there was a writing system in precolonial Africa has long been debated by students of the African scene. To most Africanists (Europeans and Americans), Africa did not have any form of writing whatsoever. Although Egypt did have a writing system, it had no cultural ties with countries south of the Sahara.

On the other hand, African intellectuals and scholars, such as Cheik Anta Diop and Theophile Obenga, agree that Africa did have writing systems, particularly among West African groups such as the Vais of Liberia. [In East Africa, Ethiopia is a good example, with a writing system that is several centuries old.]

However, to exclusively associate anti-intellectualism with lack or presence of writing forms and systems is to commit a serious error. There is no doubt that initiation into reading is often spurred by the presence of writing forms and systems. As such, absence of reading skills and writing forms may serve as a significant hurdle against efforts at intellectualizing.

Depending upon whether one accepts or denies the presence of writing symbolic forms in precolonial Africa, a crucial fact must be reckoned with. Intellectualism is not synonymous with reading and writing alone, although in the contemporary world these two skills are considered the leading indicators of intellectual predisposition.

Students of education in traditional Africa, such as Abdou Moumouni, have stressed the following point. In pre-colonial Africa, the child underwent a strenuous physical and moral training to shape his body, mind, and soul. At the same time, however, he was educated to be a wise person, i.e., a philospher (a friend of wisdom). To mold him into this, the elders taught him the art of logical reasoning through tools such as proverbs, puzzles, riddles. Moreover, through observation and development of memory skills, he acquired simple, practical, or common knowledge. *(Education in Africa*, New York, Praeger, 1968).

Another possible root of African anti-intellectualism is the "profession" factor. Colonialism introduced formal education into Africa. As a system, colonial education drew a sharp distinction between professional (clerical) and vocational training or skills. Mainly because it was elitist and sought to train professional clerks to assist white administrators in their daily routine duties, colonial education set up stiff entrance and qualifying examinations. The very few Africans who succeeded in meeting these stipulated requirements were rewarded with clerical jobs in the colonial administrative apparatus. The rest often joined either the few existing vocational schools or the military.

In keeping with the fact that professional (clerical) skills and jobs are usually associated with higher social status, all those who acquired a trade through training in vocational schools, or made careers out of the military service, started to suffer from an "occupational inferiority complex." And since they were in the majority, they did not hide their feelings of resentment against the clerical class.

Most important still is that as colonial authorities began to provide advanced educational training (college and university) to their subjects, the resentment shifted one step beyond the old rift between professionals (clerks) and vocational/military trainees. At this time, under the impulse of the law of self-preservation, the old clerical class stood against the new intellectual elite (bred in European colleges and universities) and formed a new alliance with the vocational/military trainee group.

The Afro-American Experience

Writing about the Afro-American academic community in the 1950s, E. Franklin Frazier noted that many Black professors in colleges and universities, such as Howard University, were no longer living up to their professional trust as academicians. The world of make-believe in which the making of money became the leading priority turned them into functional (academic) illiterates. In their haste to make more money, these would-be academicians had time neither to read nor to prepare lessons for their classes. If anything, they spent most of their evenings and nights at marathon poker games *(Black Bourgeoisie*, New York, Collier Books, 1962).

What Frazier wrote of the Afro-American intelligentsia in the 1950s is equally becoming true for the African professional and political elite. Unlike earlier intellectuals, such as Edward Blyden, Casely Hayford, and Leopold Senghor, who had to work hard to prove that the African was intellectually capable of mastering the white man's skills and tools, the new African elite has become complacent about the intellectual status of the Black man in a world community—a world community that is dominated by the white man.

The fact that they have been able to earn degrees from colleges and universities has led many of the African professional and political elite to believe that they have sufficiently made the point about the Black African's intellectual ability. In reality, what their present behavior is indicating is that they have exactly missed the point. They have made intellectual growth synonymous with number of years in the classroom. That is to say, learning begins and ceases with years in school, and subsequent activi-

ties should be built neither around reading nor writing.

When the Black American scholar Carter G. Woodson first launched the concept of "mis-education," he used it to expose and pinpoint the serious pitfalls built into the educational programs set up for Blacks by whites in the United States. (*Mis-Education of the Negro,* Washington, D. C., Associated Publishers, Inc., 1933).

Presently, a new type of mis-education is being constantly revealed in the attitudes of the contemporary African professional and political elite, in that educational and learning processes are being associated and equated with well-defined parameters or contours.

Like some of the Afro-American professional elite of the 1950s, the majority of the contemporary African professional and political elite neither reads, writes, nor engages in any other intellectual pursuits. It devotes most of its time to money-making and partying. With the occasional exception of newspapers, the only items usually read are official or business papers.

Looking at his own Congolese society in the early 1970s, Henri Lopes observed the following: 1) university and college graduates, turned professionals and politicians, were making mundane activities such as dancing, music, social parties, and chasing women their new and only religion; and 2) they detested reading and all other intellectual pursuits.

In his award-winning work, *Tribaliques,* Lopes used episodes and conversations between his characters to substantiate his point about the mounting tide of anti-intellectualism in the Congolese society. Here are some reflective thoughts of the narrator of the second episode:

I thought that reading a good book was by far better and that Africa, by constantly laughing and dancing, had allowed more astute peoples to take her by surprise and enslave her. I also thought that while we were busy dancing and drinking each evening in Poto-Poto, scientists, scholars, strategists and military men on the Southern tip of the continent were busy studying and were undergoing all kinds of training in order to better enslave us. What would we do if they were to suddenly show up at our doorsteps? Would we disarm them by charming them with our voices and melodies?

Makouta-Mboukou is another Congolese educator and writer who is equally concerned about the growing wave of anti-intellectualism in the Congolese society in particular and African societies in general. In *Introduction a la litterature noire,* for instance, he bitterly complained about the gross feeling of apathy rampant among the Congolese elite on matters of artistic and intellectual pursuits. To him, these are matters of great importance in that, as activities and processes, they are the best and only means to help put various aspects of the African life into a time and spatial framework.

"How can the uneducated masses," he went on to ask, "reach an understanding about the requirements of nation-building if that group of enlightened men in society does not take interest in artistic and intellectual activities?"

In an interview published by *Le Monde Diplomatique* in June 1979, the Kenyan historian William Robert Ochieng complained vehemently about the loss in Kenyan society of the intellectual spirit and zeal exhibited by earlier leaders such as Harry Thuku, Jomo Kenyatta and Tom Mboya.

As an example, Ochieng cited the case of a highly educated member of the Kenyan Parliament who, during a two-year tenure, has not read a single line of the country's constitution.

Conclusion

As a social force and as an expression of attitude, anti-intellectualism is dangerous for all contemporary societies. For, without a functioning group of intellectuals, a society is deprived of a certain level of consciousness and insight into vital problems. Enough cannot be said about the fact that intellectuals were, by and large, instrumental in taking Europe from the Dark Ages to the Modern Age. The Galileos, the Newtons, and the Nietzches were, by far, more important than all those conquistadors and merchants who went to other parts of the world to plunder, enslave, and colonize their peoples.

What is more interesting is that if these peoples, who were ravaged, enslaved, and colonized, succeeded in rising against and freeing themselves from European domination, it was due to the mental work and effort of a few daring individuals who went ahead and challenged the status quo.

In Africa, particularly, "for decades before the era African nations began to regain their historic independence, Black writers and intellectuals had been prophetically preparing the way for these events. The Black intellectual came to play the role of spiritual guide to a political revolution of major global importance — the African revolution." (Lilyan Kesteloot, *Intellectual Origins of the African Revolution,* The Black Orpheus Press, Washington, D. C. 1972).

The present wave of anti-intellectualism in African societies not only compromises and contradicts this spirit and legacy, but also provides further ammunition to all who want to perpetuate theories about the Black man's intellectual inferiority and mental laziness.

To lack functioning intellectuals is to lack leadership in the following areas: 1) the posing of problems; 2) the definition of problems; 3) the analysis of problems, and 4) the solution of problems.

On the whole, in human history where the enlightened have ceased to be the leaders of enlightenment, the conse-

quence has been a major downward trend in terms of material, social, and human progress. At best, stagnation has set in society. At worst, backwardness, barbarism, and savagery have overpowered society itself. □

Alexandre Mboukou, Ph.D., is affiliated with the Career Education Institute, University of the District of Columbia.

Books

The Chaneysville Incident

By David Bradley
Harper & Row, New York
432 pp., $12.95

Reviewed by Gregory S. Kearse

Any Black writer who reminds me of a younger James Baldwin deserves attention. What I find compelling about David Bradley, the author of *The Chaneysville Incident*, (and, therefore Baldwin) is that the characters in his book are sufficiently interesting to draw you into their world, insist upon their own logic and on their own terms, and whether you agree with them or not, make you understand and accept their history, respond to their story.

In chess games, at the grandmaster level, there is a certain beauty and logic created, the power of which allows the pieces to play the game *sans* master. Bradley's characters must have had impish delight in surprising their astute creator in their actions and attitudes; in their whims and rebellions; in their screams and laughter. For it is not until the penultimate page that the reader actually gets to know that there is ironic distance between author and protagonist. Hence, they are real characters—people—because they have history . . . a past, a present and a future.

I am now sorry that I did not read Bradley's first novel, *South Street*, which he wrote while an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania. Yes, he was

bright and articulate. And yes, he was out of synch with the rest of the Black student population. While the other students (in 1968) deluded themselves (if that were possible in 1968 in Pennsylvania) into believing that they had "Black Power," Bradley recognized the myths and lies we told ourselves as newly "liberated" souls.

As it turns out, Bradley was closer to the light. He had visited a bar on South Street in Philadelphia and had talked with the local people there. He had witnessed the poverty and the powerlessness, and they had confirmed his own perspectives of the true Black condition. "It was a liberating experience for me. I'd tell them what the college people thought and they'd say 'Bunk, here's the way it is.' I fell in love with those people and with the street." And *South Street*, the novel, was born.

Despite some rather minor flaws, *The Chaneysville Incident* is a novel of power, history and passion. It is a charming and witty second effort, and Bradley has nothing to apologize for. His writing ability and style are marvelous. Witness this lyrical gem: "Sometimes you can hear the wire, hear it reaching out across the miles; whining with its own weight, crying from the cold, panting at the distance, humming with the phantom sounds of someone else's conversation. You cannot always hear it—only sometimes; when the night is deep and the room is dark and the sound of the phone's ringing has come slicing through the uneasy sleep."

That is the way the book opens, and it is difficult to ignore its power and magnetism.

David Bradley, I am happy to say, will be difficult to ignore, much in the same marvelous way that we could not ignore James Alan McPherson's debut with *Hue and Cry* (and subsequently the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Elbow Room*).

The Chaneysville Incident is an actual historical event, paradoxically obscured

by history. The event involved the escape and recapture of 13 slaves during the heyday of the Underground Railroad. Rather than be returned to their plantations and owners, the 13 slaves, so the legend goes, preferred to be killed. They were shot and placed in 13 unmarked graves. It is this paradox of history as fact that is one of the central themes of the novel.

Bradley has managed well a somewhat complex plot surrounding the legend of the 13 runaway slaves. The narrator, John Washington, is a young, Black college history professor who is summoned by a disreputable but colorful old raconteur named Jack Crawley. Jack is dying, and like many derelicts in urban areas, knows a lot more than his disposition and station suggest. Old Jack, as he is called, was the best friend of the narrator's father (Moses Washington) and can somehow unravel his mysterious death.

But the solution to Moses Washington's demise depends upon the solution of the far older *Chaneysville Incident*. And this is where Bradley is at his best and at his worst in the denouement. In places, the plotting is somewhat contrived to carry the reader along: a hunt, the exposure of a crooked lawyer and the ridiculous death of John Washington's brother.

The flaw is a trivial matter, however. Even the occasional self conscious intrusions of the author ("Judith said something highly unprintable") are forgivable, for Bradley judiciously uses several rhetorical devices which neatly circumvent several difficult novelistic traps. The shortcomings are eclipsed by the novel's other great strengths.

And one of the great strengths of the novel is the dialogue. When Old Jack is telling his stories, the speech is in an intriguing dialect: "Mose wasn't 'xactly human when it come to coverin' ground in a hurry . . . that night was like the Goddamn trottin' races at the county fair. . . . I won't say the trees went flyin'