REVIEW ARTICLE

POST-COLONIAL ANXieties: (RE)PRESENTING AFRICAN INTELLECTUALS

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The study of intellectuals in and from Africa has gained currency during the last decade. Since 2000 journals such as Mots Pluriels in Australia, African Issues in the United States, and Locumer Protokolle in Germany have all published special issues on ‘African intellectuals’. This interest in intellectuals was sparked partly by anxiety over the ‘brain drain’

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and partly by the realization that remittances from migrants were overtaking foreign direct investment as sources of foreign exchange for many countries. Since then, many conferences and workshops have been held on the continent and in the diaspora to consider the role of African intellectuals in politics, development, science, and other pressing issues.

What is the African intellectual? Is she in any way different from the European, Asian, or American intellectual? Are there specific themes or concerns that define African intellectuals? What is an intellectual? The nine authors in Thandika Mkandawire’s new book *African Intellectuals: Rethinking politics, language, gender and development* provide a range of answers. Ali Mazrui defines the intellectual as ‘a person who has the capacity to be fascinated by ideas and has acquired the skill to handle most of them effectively’. He argues for an ‘intellectual determinism’ that recognizes that ‘peasants and the proletariat may be able to pull down the old order. But it takes educated minds to conceive and construct an alternative social programme.’

Mazrui prefers a non-racial and transatlantic definition of Africanity and pan-Africanism. African intellectuals, therefore, are characterized by the specificity of their intellectual concerns, such as pan-Africanism, apartheid, development, and the question of language, rather than race or geography.

Joseph Ki-Zerbo argues that ‘producers of scientific, literary or artistic works could be considered intellectuals. In the broad sense however, anybody who earns a living mainly from intellectual activities could be viewed as an intellectual.’ According to Ki-Zerbo the intellectual can play a positive or negative role in the society. ‘Like the griot, they can successively destroy and edify, magnify or drag one and the same person through the mud.’

Ki-Zerbo’s definition is too broad. If everyone who thinks is an intellectual, then no one is distinctively so. Not all discourses are of equal significance.

Providing a more nuanced definition, Raymond Suttner uses Gramsci’s notions of ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’ intellectuals to argue that intellectuals are ‘people who broadly speaking, create for a class or people ... a coherent and reasoned account of the world’. Intellectuals provide meanings to situations, guidelines for escaping from oppression as well as visions of alternative social conditions. Suttner further argues that institutions such as the African National Congress in South Africa are ‘collective organic

6. Ibid., p. 56.
8. Ibid., p. 79.
intellectuals’ because they are engaged in forming a common will and voicing a ‘new national popular’ through education. But although the task of the intellectuals was to find a way out of oppression, their class bias may have limited their visions. Historical circumstances also affected intellectuals so that the radical perspectives of the past became less acceptable once the ANC became the ruling party in South Africa.

Suttner’s notion of a collective organic intellectual could also be applied to the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the Pan-African research organization that sponsored the publication of the texts under review. Political parties, research organizations, think tanks, and other such institutions can all play an intellectual role in society. The collective intellectual framework examines institutions as producers of knowledge rather than individual intellectuals. The relations of power that suffuse intellectual work are foregrounded by this institutional framework. These relations both facilitate and limit the range of intellectual discourse allowed within the organizations. Donors and other stakeholders may also impose limitations. Examining CODESRIA as a collective intellectual, therefore, will allow us to illuminate both mainstream and dissident voices.

The chapters in the two volumes under review were first presented as papers at the thirtieth anniversary celebration of CODESRIA in December 2003. CODESRIA is the premier Pan-African research organization on the African continent. The organization’s mission is to facilitate research, publication, and dialogue among African intellectuals. Its conferences, publications, and documentation centre are critical resources for the training and development of African researchers. Thus these two collections provide a rare opportunity for reflection upon the history of ideas in the post-colonial era, albeit through CODESRIA’s perspective. As we shall see below, however, the voices of dissident scholars are absent, even though some of them were raised in debates within CODESRIA.

The chapters in the two collections were selected from hundreds of presentations on the conference theme: ‘Intellectuals, Nationalism, and the Pan-African Idea’. Mkandawire’s collection focused on politics, language, gender and development, with contributions by and about academics and university-trained intellectuals. Beckman’s collection includes essays on literary giants such as Achebe, Ngugi, and Soyinka, student movements, soldiers, and ‘fourth generation’ intellectuals. The two collections, therefore, cover both academics and grassroots intellectuals such as students, soldiers, and political activists.

In his introduction, Mkandawire argues that there are three generations of post-colonial African intellectuals. The ‘first generation’ intellectuals accepted the developmentalist agenda of the political class. They joined the nationalist quest to end the unholy trinity of poverty, ignorance, and disease.
He calls this a ‘period of affirmation of the nationalist project and rejection of imperial intellectual domination and neo-colonial machinations’. Ki-Zerbo argues that this period was characterized by the injunction ‘Silence: Development in Progress’. Issa Shivji complains that the period brought ‘passivity and marginality’ and even ‘submission and subservience’. Student disturbances were limited to questions of material comfort, rarely touching on matters of national importance. This relative harmony was related to the fact that universities were recruiting grounds for the civil service, while the academics shared an ideology with those in power.

Relations between the intellectuals and governments were tense during the ‘second generation’ in the 1980s. Intellectuals were disillusioned by the corruption, violence, and incompetence of the political class, accusing leaders of ‘betraying the nationalist struggle’. This period marked the end of post-independence euphoria. Nationalism had lost its lustre. Independence leaders had been overthrown, killed or exiled. Lack of resources reduced universities to squalor and overcrowding, while politicians and their international donors argued that the universities should focus on ‘applied’ rather than ‘fundamental’ research. Reflecting the neo-liberal dogma of the period, leaders argued that investing in higher education was inefficient because Africa could rely on expatriate expertise available at institutions such as the World Bank. As a result, thousands of African intellectuals were forced into exile, while the continent’s impoverished countries annually spent billions on armies of expatriate ‘experts’.

Reflecting the dissatisfaction with the developmentalist agendas of the state and international donors, CODESRIA’s General Assembly dropped the term ‘development’ from its programmes in 1986 because it overshadowed new scholarship about human rights, gender, equality, and culture. Critics argued that the ideology of development had also been used to silence scholars and justify anti-democratic policies imposed by governments and Western donors. Criticism focused on what had gone wrong with the implementation of development policies that African intellectuals once considered desirable.

Following Mkandawire, Nana Akua Anyidoho’s contribution discusses a ‘fourth generation’ of African intellectuals engaged in ‘insider scholarship’. Anyidoho argues that what is important is not the positionality

11. Ibid., p. 18.
12. Ibid., p. 18.
13. Ibid., p. 28.
of the scholars but their engagement with the issues that affect them. Anyidoho begins her chapter with a reflection on an incident at a CODESRIA conference in Accra, Ghana where an African scholar of mixed parentage working in the diaspora presented a paper on the impact of global intellectual currents on African scholarship. Senior African scholars on the continent promptly questioned the relevance of global trends to African scholarship. She interprets this as reflecting a generation gap, arguing that the continental scholars were ‘third generation’ scholars who were not about to be judged by Northern or diasporic standards.

The response of African scholars on the continent, however, could have occurred during any of the preceding generations. This discomfort with the diasporic perspective is reminiscent of the discomfort with, and exclusion of, scholars of racial and ethnic minorities and those with unorthodox ideas during all the three generations. Although Anyidoho’s chapter wisely argues for research rooted in one’s experience, be it diasporic or continental, this would not necessarily bring more acceptance for those considered outsiders.

There is a need, therefore, for an alternative theoretical framework that accounts for the differences in perspective evident through the three decades. Even during the euphoric post-independence days there were critics, such as Frantz Fanon, warning about the ‘pitfalls of national consciousness’. Female scholars and others considered minorities were actively marginalized, even within Pan-African organizations such as CODESRIA. To understand the positions of African intellectuals we need to examine their ideological perspectives and their relations to the permutations of national and global power structures. By classifying intellectuals according to their ideological perspectives, such as nationalist, left, or liberal, we can see their differences and relations to power structures more clearly than a classification in terms of generations. The nationalists, for instance, accepted the nation-building agenda of the post-colonial political class and were associated closely with the new states and their international donors. The leftists, however, were sceptical of the nationalists’ agenda and, like Fanon, warned of the formation of a comprador class of politicians and intellectuals. They were suspicious of donors and their modernization schemes, calling instead for autonomy and self-reliance. The liberal intellectuals range from post-modernists like Achille Mbembe to reformists like Soyinka and Achebe or liberal democrats like Ali Mazrui. The liberals are reformists who, more often than not, align themselves with the global neo-liberal agenda of human rights, liberalization, and democratization.

Thus, if we re-examine Mkandawire’s first generation of intellectuals, we find that although some were seduced by the nationalist rhetoric of the ‘philosopher kings’, others saw through the smokescreen and pointed out the foibles of blind nationalism. Radical intellectuals were sceptical of the nationalist project and its ties to ‘modernization’. Many of these
scholars argued that development was not linear and that the global system was not benign. Scholars such as Samir Amin called for ‘de-linking’ and ‘collective self-reliance’ as the solutions to the problem of neo-colonialism. They doubted the ability of the political class to lead the development process. Radical critics like Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong’o attacked bourgeois nationalism. By the 1980s, most liberals were also highly critical of state neglect of education, particularly higher education, and efforts to politicize universities.

Stung by such criticism, states withheld funding and patronage from the universities, while jailing, torturing, and even killing dissident intellectuals. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s universities were neglected and intellectuals compromised. Some became sycophants and court jesters and were rewarded with state and university positions. Others were suppressed ruthlessly. Many went into exile. Those who remained were forced to scramble for resources while grappling with repression and pressures to remain silent and subservient. Mazrui, for instance, blames Idi Amin in Uganda, authoritarianism and Cold War anti-communism in Kenya, and academic intimidation in favour of socialism in Tanzania for killing intellectualism in East Africa.15

As a result of these forces, exile became a permanent condition for many African intellectuals. A majority of the contributors to these two volumes under review, for instance, are based outside the African continent. Most of the celebrated writers and scholars are exiles of one sort or another. This phenomenon is analysed insightfully in Paul Tiyambe Zeleza’s contribution on the ‘academic diaspora’.16 He estimates that an average of 20,000 highly trained professionals, academics among them, have left the continent annually since the 1990s. Although the academic diaspora is fragmented and complex, Zeleza argues that it ‘has the potential … for a productive and progressive engagement with Africa’.17 According to Zeleza, this potential is evident in the Pan-African movement that made its presence felt at critical moments in modern African history. The challenge, he argues, is to identify the tendencies that can be ‘mobilized for African intellectual development’.18

Grassroots intellectuals such as religious leaders, artists, entrepreneurs, students, journalists, and even military officers filled the space left by the marginalization and exile of dissident voices. These are examples of organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense because they emerge from different locations and represent diverse groups and perspectives. The autobiographies

17. Ibid., p. 209.
of Nigeria’s military rulers reviewed by Gbemisola Adeoti, for instance, demonstrate the assertion of pseudo-intellectualism in defence of military regimes in Nigeria. Adeoti describes the narratives as exercises in ‘self-writing’ where military rulers try to re-invent themselves in the images of independence era leaders such as Azikiwe, Awolowo, and Balewa, who also wrote autobiographies. The soldiers hire ghostwriters to portray them as reluctant heroes who emerged from the barracks to rescue their nation from venal and corrupt civilian regimes.

Other grassroots intellectual formations include the youth and student movements analysed by Björn Beckman, Jude Fokwang, and Harri Englund. These essays provide examples of youth negotiating treacherous terrains of European Union indoctrination (Englund), military dictatorship and structural adjustment (Beckman), and ambiguous futures (Fokwang). Englund describes the disempowering and depoliticizing impact of the EU’s ‘civic education’ programme in Malawi. Englund shows how non-governmental organizations that claim to empower people are used to promote the undemocratic and selfish agendas of international forces and their allies in Malawi. He argues that the programmes foster elitism and attitudes that isolate youth leaders from their communities. Beckman argues that despite the series of military dictatorships and lack of resources at Nigeria’s universities, students have ‘demonstrated a continued commitment to the national project’. According to Beckman, students remain the most organized section of the youth in most nations. Although weakened by the rise of ethno-religious politics, the students in Nigeria ‘have been a thorn in the flesh of colonial, neo-colonial and autocratic regimes’.

Literary artists form another cluster of intellectuals who have contentious relations with states. Some artists aligned themselves with the states and provided the cultural superstructure for the nation-building programme. Dissident writers, novelists, playwrights, and artists excelled at pointing out the foibles of the nationalists. Wole Soyinka’s *Play of Giants*, for instance, satirizes the personalized rule of post-colonial African despots such as Amin, Bokassa, and Mobutu. As a result, writers and artists were among the first

24. Ibid., p. 6.
targets of state repression. Even among the dissidents, however, there were ideological differences. M. S. C. Okolo, for instance, argues that Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Marxist aesthetic in *Petals of Blood* is a revolt against the neo-liberal order, whereas *Anthills of the Savannah* reflects Chinua Achebe’s reformist agenda. *Petals of Blood* indicts the political class for corruption and neo-colonial malfeasance, and demonstrates how these policies lead to revolutionary violence. *Anthills of the Savannah*, on the other hand, warns against revolution and instead reflects on gradual transformation based on tradition and custom. Okolo argues for a mixed perspective that includes both revolutionary and reformist programmes.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o gave the keynote address at CODESRIA’s thirtieth anniversary conference. He spoke on language, memory, and identity. Wa Thiong’o’s essay in Mkandawire’s collection stands out in its autonomy, innovativeness, argumentation, and erudition. He argues that African intellectuals are alienated from the general African public because they conduct their business in European languages and language is the repository of memory and thus of history and culture. To complete the work of decolonization, he argues, African intellectuals will have to address the African people in languages they can understand. Otherwise they will continue speaking only to each other and the North. Writing in European languages enriches them while allowing African languages to die out. Wa Thiong’o’s treatise on language constitutes a unique intervention in an institution such as CODESRIA that conducts its business in English and French.

This inclusion of literary figures and debates about language is a new and encouraging direction in CODESRIA. The absence of dissident intellectuals, however, is evident to those involved with CODESRIA in the late 1990s, when a furious debate erupted between post-structuralists and political economists. Critics such as Achille Mbembe disparaged the nationalist and Pan-Africanist discourses as ‘nativist’ and retrogressive. Mbembe, who became the General Secretary of CODESRIA in 1996, called on African intellectuals to go beyond ‘Afro-Radicalism’ and ‘nativism’ by engaging in a polemical deconstruction of what he called ‘discourses of Africanity’. He attacked intellectuals associated with CODESRIA for making ‘autonomy, resistance, [and] emancipation the sole criterion for legitimacy of a authentic African discourse’. According to Mbembe, these perspectives promote a ‘cult of victimhood’ and a view of ‘history as sorcery’. He argues that these scholars operate under a racist paradigm that invents an ‘African

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The fact that Mbembe wrote the essay after one term as Secretary General of CODESRIA, lends credence to his critics’ assertion that the essay was a frustration-fuelled diatribe against those who had thwarted his ambitions. Godwin Murunga, for instance, argues that Mbembe was ‘motivated by his failure to achieve the goal of getting CODESRIA’s scholarship “out of the ghetto” as he once put it’. What is interesting for our purposes here is that Mbembe attacks most of the key intellectuals who were responsible for the evolution of CODESRIA into the Pan-African institution that it is today. Thus he questions the legacy of CODESRIA that is celebrated in these two collections. That Mbembe is not alone in his critique of nationalist discourses is evident in responses to his essay (‘African modes of self-writing’) from a long list of commentators including Souleymane Diagne, Paul Gilroy, Ato Quayson, Jane Guyer, Benedetta Jules-Rosette, Francoise Verges, and Arif Dirlik.

Most of the scholars who responded to Mbembe’s deconstruction of Africanity in intellectual formations such as CODESRIA were located in the diaspora. Among the most perceptive is Baschir Diagne, who strongly supports what he interprets as Mbembe’s argument that Africanity ‘must be seen as an open question’. Ato Quayson sees Mbembe’s intervention as a call to negate blackness as a paradigm of victimhood and embrace ‘a total negation of what Africa means’. Bennetta Jules-Rosette takes Mbembe to task for his ‘Afro-pessimism’, his failure to deal with female selfhood, and his dismissal of the possibility of diaspora – ‘the idea that culture can be transmitted across the Middle Passage and even reconstituted’. Paul Gilroy, on the other hand, praises Mbembe’s work as ‘a learned, provocative, and worthwhile essay that offers a wealth of subtle insights [that] reverberate through my own thoughts’.

Although Mbembe’s critique of Africanity as practised by CODESRIA exposes the ambiguity of the concept, he does not take into account the power relations that structure intellectual work. By claiming that any protest is ‘victimism’ and any invocation of identity ‘nativism’, Mbembe authorizes disengagement and moral irresponsibility. If African scholars of the past were obsessed with nationalism and pan-Africanism, some younger scholars...
today run the risk of being paralysed by a retreat into Afro-pessimism and ‘fashionable nonsense’. Thus although self-criticism may be necessary, some of Mbembe’s work ‘borders on self-flagellation’.37

The examination of CODESRIA as a collective intellectual highlights the ways in which the organization has filled a critical role in training and publishing African intellectuals since the 1970s. This vantage point has also allowed us to expose the limitations that come with such collective efforts. This foregrounding of power relations offers a corrective to post-structuralists, who emphasize autonomy without examining the power relations that structure intellectual activity. The ideals of intellectual universality, autonomy, and independence must be balanced by a commitment to representing and articulating a message to and for a particular public which confronts internal and external dogma.