



INTELLECTUALS AND FORGING THE FUTURE OF AFRICA:
SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON CONSCIOUSNESS
AND COMMITMENT

Los Angeles Sentinel, 07-23-26, p.B-1

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THE CENTRAL QUESTION OF THE ROLE of African intellectuals in the conception and construction of the future of Africa at this critical juncture in our history is both unavoidable and urgent. It is a question with deep roots in the pan-African project. From the early 19th century thinkers who posed Africa as both an ancient cultural ideal and a modern source of allegiance and obligation to the pan-Africanists of today, we have all stressed the need for intellectuals, men and women of ideas, creativity, knowledge, skill and commitment; to reconstruct themselves and rebuild Africa (our continental and global community) and ultimately build the world we all want and deserve to live in.

Maria Stewart, Martin Delaney, Sylvester Williams, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Mary McLeod Bethune, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Sekou Toure, Amilcar Cabral and others have put forth this call and reaffirmed the compelling urgency of this commitment. This call and commitment are rooted in the self-conscious acceptance of our shared history as African people, a shared condition of oppression and a shared will to free ourselves wherever we are, to develop and harness our human and material resources and to use them to push our lives forward and live full and meaningful lives.

To do this, intellectuals must take upon themselves certain essential obliga-

tions. *The first is to define our mission with the utmost clarity*, to define correctly the historical juncture and moment in which we now live, its cultural, political and economic meaning and its meaning for us as African peoples and as a world African community. Here, I raise Mary McLeod Bethune's statement that we intellectuals "must discover the dawn and share it with our children and the masses who need it most." Moreover, African intellectuals must mark off the field of action and then, as Maria Stewart says, enter it as both an obligation and opportunity. And the opportunity here is not only to free ourselves, but also to expand the realm of human freedom and offer a new model of what it means to be human in the world. We must, Fanon says, "reconsider the question of humankind," its current condition and future prospects.

We must concern ourselves not just with the future of Africa, but with the project and promise of *Africa as the future*, as the future of our people and the future of the world, without making chauvinist claims and without denying the great difficulties or minimizing the awesome responsibility involved. We have, as pan-Africanists, always sought to pose Africa at its best, as a moral and cultural ideal. Thus, the work of Molefi Asante, myself and others have been dedicated to lifting up this need for us to think in African-centered ways, to locate ourselves in our own culture, think new thoughts and to con-

stantly bring forth the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense.

Such a position and process of necessity leads us to the second requirement or obligation for the African intellectual - *self-preparation*. Even though we have posed the defining of the mission first, it is clear that unless intellectuals properly prepare themselves for new forms of thought and practice, the conception and carrying out of the mission will be seriously compromised.

Also, it is important for intellectuals to put forth *critiques of the constraints on African and human freedom and human flourishing*, i.e., ideas and practices of white supremacy, class domination, class interests over mass interests, all forms of sexism and similar ideas of domination that contradict and contravene the best of what it means to be both African and human in the fullest sense. They must also make an ongoing critique of all suspect talk about the end of history, the self-congratulatory illusion that everything has been solved by Europe's "triumphant move" into the 21st century. Surely, history is still moving forward through our struggles. For still the oppressed want freedom; the wronged and injured want justice; the people want power over their destiny and daily lives; and the world wants peace. And Africa must be a source and model, a paradigm of this human possibility, this promise which emerges in the context and crucible of struggle.

Moreover, African intellectuals, continental and diasporan, must offer *correctives to the constraints on human freedom*

and human flourishing, correctives of both thought and practice which point toward freedom, freedom from want, toil and domination. And above all, these ideas and practices must be rooted in those ancient African ethical pillars: *respect for the dignity and rights of the human person; the well-being and flourishing of family and community; the integrity and value of the environment; and the reciprocal solidarity and cooperation for mutual benefit of humanity*.

African intellectuals must also be, above all, *teachers, sustainers and servants of the people*. They must teach the people the unlimited possibilities inherent in them. We must break through the catechism of impossibilities taught by oppressors and teach the people new ways to walk in the world, dignity-affirming and self-developing ways to understand and assert themselves. What the world needs most and what Africans certainly need now is a sense of possibility. And this massive future-oriented project can only be achieved through the upward thrust of the people, through their coming into consciousness, through their taking their destiny and daily lives in their own hands and shaping them in their own image and interests. We must teach the masses, as Fanon says, that "everything depends on them".

In addition, African intellectuals must *constantly dialogue with African culture*. By dialoguing with Africa or African culture, I mean continuously asking it questions and seeking from it answers to the fundamental questions of humankind. The recovery and reconstruction of

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Africa as a continent and world community depends on the recovery and reconstruction of African culture and our using it as a foundation and framework to improve our current condition and to enhance our future. Sekou Toure has given us a focal category of engagement, saying that our efforts must be directed "towards full re-Africanization."

FINALLY, OUR ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY as intellectuals must be informed and undergirded by *ethical commitment and practice*, a self-conscious commitment, to speak truth, do justice, be people-focused, and as the *Odu*

Ifa says, constantly bring good into the world. Indeed, it is in pursuit of our purpose that we understand ourselves, develop ourselves, and confirm ourselves as African people. Let us go forth then as African people, conscious of our dignity and destiny and confident that we can achieve it and leave a legacy for those who come after us worthy of the name African. (Excerpts from a paper given at the Conference on the Contribution of African Diasporan Intellectuals to the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development 2003).▲

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