

Manufacturing African Studies

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Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, *MANUFACTURING AFRICAN STUDIES AND CRISES*, Codestria, Dakar, 1997, 612pp.

PAUL Tiyambe Zeleza, the author of this book, is a historian by academic training. But he is a polymath and almost an intellectual bionic boy: he is an award-winning novelist, a short story writer, a social scientist, philosopher and literary critic.

Manufacturing African Studies and Crises (henceforth abbreviated as MAS&C) is a very interesting and provocative book whose arguments and overall tone and style never flag. I say provocative not simply because he takes on all branches of Africanist scholarship and demolishes most of their cherished orthodoxies. This is also because his own ideas do actually provoke response and further thoughts from the reader, be it in agreement or disagreement. It is also provocative in one original sense: it is very rarely that the crises that have beset Africa since colonial times are ever joined to the 'studies' of the continent. After all, 'study' of a particular phenomenon or subject is supposed to increase our knowledge of it, and therefore enhance our ability to solve problems emanating from it. But Zeleza shows very convincingly in this book that 'studies' of Africa, from colonial times to the present, plus the solutions arising therefrom, have in fact contributed their own fair share to those crises—that not a few of the crises, be they man-made or natural, were in fact manufactured by the studies.

All these, plus the extensive and highly useful bibliography (all 71 pages of it) make MAS&C a book almost encyclopedic in proportion, if not in ambition. That it is not a work of original research is in fact its strength, for that makes it extremely informative and up to date on the writings and state of research in virtually all the fields that it covers.

MAS&C is a big book, 612 pages long (minus index), but both the overall groundplan and that of each chapter facilitate its reading. There are five parts, each of which deals with a cluster of related subjects. The chapters in each part are on different aspects of each subject cluster. For example, part four, the longest, deals with democracy in Africa. It has six chap-

ters, all with intriguing titles like: 'Africa's Bumpy Road to Democracy,' or 'Rewriting Independence.' All the chapters in all the five parts follow the same procedure: a summary of the situation, then a review of the relevant literature, followed by clinical diagnosis of the problems attendant on that particular subject and its Africanist study, followed by prognosis, and then solution, all rounded off with a conclusion. This structure is followed painstakingly throughout the book. Perhaps also mindful of its intimidating size, the author through the larger plan encourages the reader to take each section as a self-contained unit which can be read separately—in other words, nothing is lost if the book is read at long intervals. Both these macro and micro plans are reflected in the first and last chapters of the book: the first a narrative of the studying of Africa, the last of solving her problems. All these make an otherwise dauntingly bulky book easy to follow.

MAS&C is as much about all the assorted crises that have been the continent's lot since independence as it is about what have been written on these crises, who writes them, where, and from what perspectives. In other words, it is as much a quarrel with Africanist studies of Africa as it is a study of the nature, character, genesis of, and solutions to those crises.

Curiously enough for a thorough-going scholarly book, but also appropriate, MAS&C starts with a polemical short story and ends with two. The opening one is a satirical portrait of a western Africanist (by 'Africanist', Zeleza means 'the entire intellectual enterprise of producing knowledge based on a western epistemological order in which both educated Africans and non-Africans are engaged') who, at the end of a distinguished career receives, not praises from his former African students but fulminations and vituperations. The closing two are about a future pan-Africanist Africa, a united Africa that is also home to diasporic Africans. This is the end to which all of Zeleza's arguments in-between and throughout the book have been tending.

Zeleza states his aim succinctly in the preface (p.iii): 'an interrogation of African studies, its formulations and fetishes, theories and trends, possibilities and pitfalls.' But he does more than a demolition job, he also attempts reconstruction and to show the way towards the development of 'organic intellectuals' on the continent. If by 'organic intellectuals' he means intellectuals who produce knowledge based on African epistemological categories, then this is a tall order indeed. Not that it is impossible, but that it requires a complete rethinking and overhauling of the aims, ideology and practice of so-called modern education as it presently exists in Africa. But right now, Africa is too besotted with western education as brought to the continent and left behind by the colonialists to even begin questioning it. Moreover, nowhere in the book does Zeleza identify that education as the root-

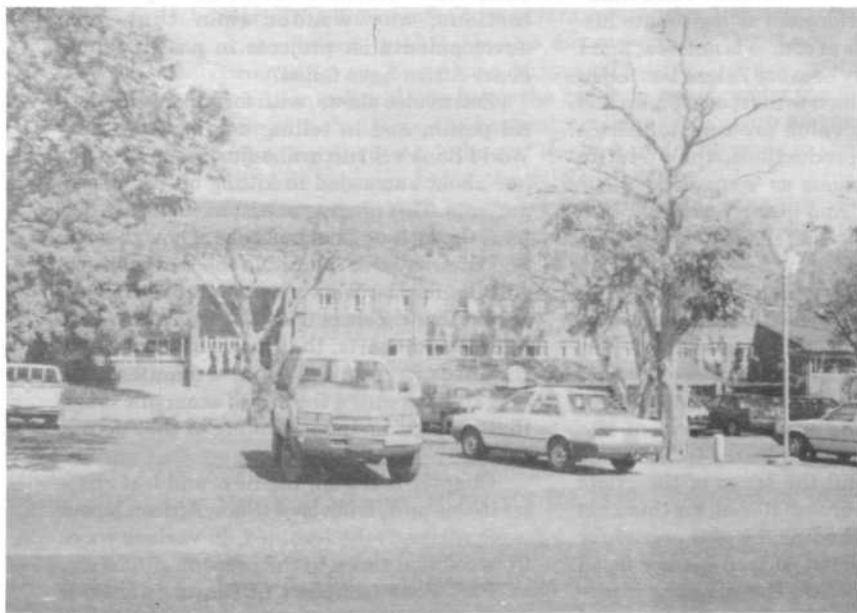
examine the situation of the contemporary African intellectual, of which he identifies two types: the resident or home-based intellectual and the migrant one. Both types receive short shrift from Zeleza's satirical pen, though he does reserve some sympathy for the latter type, which includes those who have migrated to the North (i.e., Europe and North America). In the next chapter he examines the structural, cultural, social and political situations of African social scientists working at home, their advantages and disadvantages. The major disadvantage, he sees, is the gradual and inexorable curtailing of academic freedom due to the fact that state, as their employer plays 'a pivotal role in the social production of intellectuals in Africa' (p.25). But the process of curtailment includes a significant dose of subtle-censorship. Zeleza also examines the role of foreign donors in the production of social science knowledge

because their research is geared almost exclusively toward 'development'. Similarly, even when they provide money for African researchers, it is this kind of research, not basic research, that they directly or indirectly promote-the kind of research a colleague once called the 'problems and prospect' kind. In chapter four he examines the publishing situation and, again, the picture is bleak. First he looks at the built-in bias, with copious statistical data in support, against African scholars in general, and against women in particular even where the subject is women's studies, in European and North American journals. This is particularly pathetic, for most appointments and promotions committees in African universities privilege publication in foreign journals over local ones.

Zeleza also scrutinises the book famine that has been raging on the continent since IMF/World Bank's bitter pill of Structural Adjustment was forced down Africa's throat in the mid-1980s.

Part Two of MAS&C is devoted to African historiographies, Zeleza's own academic turf. Although he has few kind words for Afrocentrism, the counter-narrative to Eurocentric historiography on Africa, he sometimes falls into its mental mould, as part of his pan-Africanist dream.

After discussing nationalist historiography and its illusions, omissions and bankruptcies, which did not begin to become clear until long after independence, Zeleza goes back in time



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cause of the Africanist scholarship that pervades the continent, nor does he suggest anywhere how to replace it with organic knowledge, or what that organic knowledge actually consists of. This is a pity, for I too believe that current education on the continent is inorganic, imitative, and its products doomed to permanent derivativeness. But Zeleza being essentially a structuralist (even though he has no good word for all the faddish 'posts'), he cannot allow room for decisions that depend mainly on human agencies-for human beings as free agents acting to create their own systems.

The four remaining chapters in part one

to cover imperialist historiography and the various pet theories (including that of poverty) that guide their writing, from the earliest colonial times to the present. Also fully engaged in this section are issues like 'Gender Biases in African Historiography' and 'Representing African Women' in history. Along the way, he surveys scholarly books on African history by both African and non-African historians, and textbooks for secondary schools. In keeping with his deconstructive approach, Zeleza of course begins by interrogating the definitions and limits of history as it is conventionally understood and practiced as an academic discipline. For example, he makes the very cogent point that nationalist historiography, as instituted in African universities from colonial times to the present, actually helped to undermine 'the prospects of decolonising African history' (pp.146-7). Having cleared much space for himself, he can bring in history as remembered and transmitted by oral performers as legitimate historical source. This of course is not new, and I raise it here simply because Zeleza has fallen into the error common to most academics and intellectuals who value pre-colonial Africa cultural/artistic productions: they tend to view such productions as 'sources' for their own now 'modern' and literary essays.

In other words, the tendency to see such pre-colonial productions through the Eurocentric prism which they castigate, rather than fully achieved and autonomous, remains, though sometimes inadvertent. Furthermore, since Zeleza tends to see the past as mainly the history of various kinds of struggle 'over the organisations of the economy, politics and culture,' (p.145), one wonders how useful the songs of the griots can be, even as source material, for this kind of history. Along the line, he also argues for the inclusion of North African history in all sub-Saharan textbooks. This of course is preparatory to his main historiographical agenda: the writing of pan-African history. In the next two chapters, Zeleza emphasises the fact that women remained invisible in African historiography during the colonial time, but that is a situation now being urgently redressed. Zeleza goes deep into why his was so. I recommend Oyeronke Oyeewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) to anybody more interested in this subject.

Zeleza's intellectual anger blazes forth in Part Three, aptly titled 'Encountering Development.' Using the term 'developmentalism' pejoratively, he traces its archaeology in Africa back to the inter-war years in the West.

Contrary to the humanitarian/philanthropic shine which was put on 'developing' colonial territories, the colonialists embarked on that project to aid their own recovery after the destruction of first, the first world war, and then the second. Any wonder, then, that development in colonial Africa mostly amounted to no more than drafting, through sometimes violent means, African farmers into cultivating cash crops for European factories. In the process, production of food crops fell; societies that were self-sufficient in food production became intermittent victims of famine and continous rising food costs. Thus, along with consumer desire for European goods, hunger was also cultivated. 'Colonial agriculture,' in his words, '...marginalised food production, mined the soil, and degraded the environment. It also introduced patterns of land ownership and social relations of production which gravely undermined coherent social responses to famine and other crisis' 9.258). Built on these gross distortions, any wonder then that most developmentalist projects in post-independence Africa have failed?

Zeleza also shows, with formidable analytical power, and in telling details, how IMF/World Bank's Structural Adjustment medicine has about succeeded in killing off its African patients. This programme is, incidentally, perhaps the latest global instance of how theories and knowledge developed in the West and specifically for the West have manufactured crises in Africa. Zeleza tries to show, again with figures and charts, that many of the crisis of the 1970s were, in the main, 'a manifestation and an outcome of the world economic crises that erupted' at the beginning of that decade (p.276).

Chapter fourteen, the next and last chapter in this part, is devoted to how African labour was progressively devalued, in various ways, from colonial times to the present.

Part Four (chapters fifteen to twenty) is devoted to 'imagining democracy' in Africa. Here, especially in chapter fifteen, Zeleza lives up to his deconstructive aim and almost becomes an iconoclast. He shows that not even in the West have the realities of democratic governance caught up with its aims and ideals. But here, one can accuse Zeleza of indulging in the favourite pastime of non-western academics: West-bashing.

Judging by his comments on the various models of pre-colonial African state formations that several historians have written, Zeleza does not have much admiration for any of them and he concludes the chapter by saying that the only 'blueprint for democracy in Africa, therefore, lies in the struggles themselves' (p.388). This is almost a banal truth, not helped

at all by his next seemingly profound insight that 'The future is open to numerous possibilities.' This is a surprising statement coming from a historian, for what it amounts to, in effect, is that the future and the past have no connections whatsoever; the struggle is completely free to make the future as it wants. We have seen what happened to societies that believed and acted likewise.

Chapter sixteen is on Banda and the Malawi of his deranged imagination. A Malawian himself, Zeleza's account is intimate and harrowing, gaining power to move us by its studied understatement.

He devotes the next three chapters to praising Europhone (mainly Anglophone) African writing for its articulation of the struggles for democratisation on the continent. African writers, he says, had almost from the beginning been dissatisfied with post-independence politics on the continent: with writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Armah, and Ngugi, 'potential disillusionment turned into actual disenchantment' (p.431). He also discusses the two main ways Europhone African literature has been political-one being the 'political nature of the subjects, the banning, exiling, imprisoning and even killing of the writers by despotic regimes being the other. Chapter nineteen starts with an academic discussion of democracy in Africa before going on to examine it 'in practice'-as it were, in a novel each

by Nurudeen Farah, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Bessie Head. Chapter twenty, titled 'Cycles of Rebirth,' is given over to four West African novelists (Aidoo, Armah, Emecheta and Okri) in whose works he examines the very large subject of 'the complex clashes, contentions and conversions of cultures in colonial and post-colonial anglophone West Africa' (p.465).

The last chapter of this last part, as said earlier, consists of excerpts from Zeleza's own two short stories on pan-Africanism, prefaced by a rather lengthy disquisition on that subject. Clearly, the unity of all Africans (Black, Arab, White) and all other peoples of African descent in the new world is a subject dear to his heart: to him, it is the only way forward for the continent.

MAS&C is a very engaging book written by a passionately engaged intellectual with formidable knowledge and great analytical power, by a creative writer with a wry sense of humour. It is a 'political' book - i.e. a book meant to concretely intervene in African studies and crisis-the full value of which can only be realised if also politically engaged by the reader, especially the African reader. So, read, it is a book with all the potentials of causing drastic revisions in the study of Africa.

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A gathering of voices Dapo Adeniyi

Nduka Otiono, VOICES IN THE RAINBOW, Oracle Books, Yaba, Lagos, 1997, 70pp.

I would dare, right from the outset, to suggest that the lone explanation for my election to render the following review is to bear witness to the plenitude of voices contained not merely in this book's title but also in the chorus that forms the bulk of the poetry collection. To identify possibly the lenders of every single voice, even if their whole contribution to our symphony is no more than a few syllables. And possibly also, to call them by their names.

Unless we put our emphasis on that one word - VOICES - we are not likely to fully appreciate the collection's peculiar experimentation with style, prominent among

which is the reportorial slant in sections by which topical identifiable elements such as shared national experience for example bouy up, often times thinly veiled, at other times with no veil at all. *Voices* therefore offer a clue to Nduka Otiono's textual strategy, to the switching of points of view, to the call-and-response mode by which more voices than one participate.

Voices in the Rainbow opens with the description of a journey undertaken across a desert. This represents the first of seven phases or movements, but we observe that the spirit of these opening lines impresses upon the succeeding sections significantly even if this was not so intended. For the poet's Sahel hike has its anguish, even its angst, but also its joy at both mid-journey - as when he comes by flourishing health-trees and oases and when his ultimate destination is sighted. Even so, the poet's journey through the length of the collection is marked by re-

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