

BOEKBESPREKING/BOOK REVIEW

DILEMMAS OF AFRICAN INTELLECTUALS IN SOUTH AFRICA: POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINTSAndré Wessels¹

Themba Sono (African Discourse Series Volume 1), Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1994. 96 pp. (including index). R40,25 (VAT included). ISBN 0-86981-854-6.

In a concise publication that should elicit much debate, Professor Themba Sono aims to analyse the factors that inhibit (black) African intellectualism. The main thesis of his **Dilemmas of African intellectuals in South Africa: political and cultural constraints** is that the intellectual environment in Africa in general (and South Africa in particular) is deformed. He believes that it is essential that the discussion about African culture in the twenty-first century be elevated.

In the apartheid years South Africa did not have a culture of free intellectual activity. Consequently very few black scholars have featured in the country to date. As Sono points out correctly, "the concept of African intellectuals as a class with reference to South Africa is historically so alien that its mention would probably evoke puzzlement, if not amusement, among the knowledgeable" (p. xi). However, Sono admits that the tyrannical custom of African culture itself has also been a handicap.

The writings of people like Charles Dlamini, Sam Nolutshangu, Mamphela Ramphele, Herbert Vilakazi and Credo Mutwa are used by Sono, not necessarily as a point of departure, but at least as a basis from which he was able to construct his own input and reflection. (See the Preface, p. ix, as well as the Bibliography, pp. 87-92.) However, it soon becomes clear that Sono is his

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own man, as he takes a radical departure from the views held by many of the African intellectuals.

In Chapter 1 ("The constrictive nature of African culture") Sono examines the nature of African culture vis-à-vis the "scientific spirit". He seeks to establish reasons why scholars have not emerged from this Africa culture. After all, long before Europeans came to Africa, local inhabitants demonstrated exceptional scientific, engineering, technological and analytical skills. A basic characteristic of indigenous culture in Africa is, of course, its non-literary mode. Sono challenges his fellow-Africans to strive to recapture the genius that once was part of their heritage.

In Chapter 2 ("Intellectuals: what they are") the nature of intellectuals is probed in an effort to answer the question regarding what they are (rather than who they are). He comes to the conclusion that since intellectuals participate in a universal culture, they transcend specific localism and particularism. Clearly they reject the domination and constraints of tradition.

Chapter 3 ("Intellectuals and South African political intelligentsia") shows, inter alia, that the demands of the managerial intelligentsia on intellectuals further compound the dilemmas faced by the latter. Also, the role of apartheid in handicapping the emergence of intellectuals is examined. Intellectuals should not be in the service of any political ideology. The free-floating spirit of an intellectual bent of mind "does not comport with the tunnel vision of political activism. This, then, partially explains the failure of African intellectuals to thrive in South Africa. Politics cherished conformity; intellectualism shuns it" (p. 52).

Chapter 4 ("Intellectualism in the new South Africa") examines (black) African scholarship in South Africa, its status, role, and the constraints with which it is faced. Sono not only reviews the thematic parameters of literary fiction, but seeks also to delineate the outlines of the universal scholarship of the future. The final chapter (Intellectualism in general: a caveat") is a restatement on intellectuals in general; i.e. in Africa and elsewhere. He concludes that "A collectivity - even of its consciousness - freezes at the level of concrete particularism; it cannot soar towards the abstractions, the metaphysical, scientific, the general. This is a fundamental lesson African scholars in South Africa will have to learn in order not to repeat and replicate the ideological and subjective errors of the past. For to do so would merely be continuing that

ignoble tradition in South Africa of closing the minds of Africans, whereas the mission should be opening African minds" (p. 84).

Sono deplores the fact that (black) African thinking in South Africa has in essence been characterised by the absence of schools of thought, and that there is a singular lack of philosophical imagination and scientific curiosity among black intellectuals in this country. He challenges his fellow-Africans to rise to the occasion and to cope with the complexities of a post-industrial world.

Somehow, the conflicting European (including American) and African worldviews will have to be reconciled, where the European (and American) worldview places the emphasis on individuality, uniqueness, competition, individual rights and survival of the fittest, whereas the African worldview places the emphasis on groupness, sameness, co-operation, collective responsibility and the survival of the tribe. African scholars need to move to the mainstream of scientific pursuits, otherwise they shall remain rooted in the celebration of their traditions in a fast-changing global village. Here we find echoes of the ideas of the great (West) African scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop, who advocated an African Renaissance that will guarantee the continent a major international role in all academic disciplines.

Professor Themba Sono has produced a thought-provoking (some would say controversial) study which should be read by all students and academic staff at South African (and other African) universities. South African universities are at present going through a process of transformation and - in some cases - "revitalisation", and multicultural/multiculturalism forms part of the scene. Themba Sono does not necessarily have all the answers to the problems facing black and white African intellectuals and their students, but he makes several very important observations and offers many worthwhile ideas. This publication deserves to be read and discussed by a wide audience.