

The Political Alienation of the Intellectual in Recent Zairian Fiction¹

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A high proportion of recent Zairian fiction features intellectuals—educators, priests, students, and professionals—as major characters who are in some way alienated from society. While the intellectuals portrayed in novels by African writers in the former British and French colonies often demonstrate a similar feeling of estrangement by virtue of their education, the sentiment is considerably more pervasive in the Zairian works where, in contrast with other African literatures, it is rarely countered by a more positive depiction of the intellectual or even by a plot that shows an intellectual living effectively within the community. In *Anthills of the Savanna*, the Nigerian writer Achebe, for example, shows educated characters reaching out fraternally to the common people, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has occasionally depicted students and professionals as triumphant participants and even leaders of popular protest movements in Kenya. In works by these writers and by others, university graduates are often presented in positions of national authority, even though such depictions may voice criticism of the overtly Western orientation of such leaders, as in Ousmane Sembène's satire of the situation in Senegal in *The Last of the Empire*. In contrast, the intellectual protagonist of the Zairian novel is more likely to encounter hostility and suspicion when he attempts to approach the less educated, while, at the other end of the social scale, he often finds himself in unqualified opposition to the objectives of those in power. The status of "front-line victim" that Wole Soyinka fears for Africa's culture producers in general emerges as a dominant, recurring theme in Zairian literature (120). An examination of several recent Zairian novels documents the extent of this distinctive depiction of the intellectual in the literature and, at the same time, suggests some of the social or political factors peculiar to Zaire's colonial history and post-independence evolution that might explain its persistence.

The Legacy of the *Carte de Mérite Civique*: Alienation From Tradition

In Ngal's *Giambatista Viko ou le viol du discours africain* (Giambatista Viko or the Rape of African Discourse), the tension between a Westernized African scholar and the representatives of traditional beliefs and customs constitutes the primary interest of the novel. Published in 1975 and therefore not the earliest of the works to be considered in this study, it allows us to root the modern intellectual's alienation in historical developments because of its emphasis on pre-colonial values. Ngal's narrator, Giambatista Viko, a rather pompous African academic with an excellent reputation among Western scholars, is seeking to revitalize Western discourse by delving into orature. His exploration into the magic of traditional African culture inadvertently attracts the wrath of its defenders who incarcerate him and then bring him to trial before an assorted gathering of traditional leaders. The scholar is condemned for having tried to betray African discourse, hence the story's subtitle. The penalty selected by the elders is referred to as "le retour au pays natal" (the return to the country of birth), and Viko is thus doomed to wander among Africa's holy places, to be re-immersed in nature, which is, in this context, explicitly opposed to rationality. The victim comments on his punishment: "I have been marginalized!" (109).² The punishment merely reinforces the gap between the intellectual and traditional African society. Beyond the humiliation of an arrogant academic, there is no victory here. The conservatives have safeguarded their traditions but deprived Africa of the possibility of revolutionizing literary discourse. The progressive voice of Viko has been silenced—his book will not be written. He has been divested of his professional activities as teacher and writer and exiled from the human community.

The intensity of the antagonism between Viko and the guardians of tradition can be more readily understood if we go back to the period before independence when education was the essential factor in determining class difference. In order to maintain the extraordinarily effective administrative machinery of the Congo, Belgium had, by 1922, instituted a system of education, generally under the direction of Catholic missionaries, that enabled it to employ Africans extensively in clerical and supervisory positions, a policy which had as one of its consequences the hierarchical stratification of society, the *évolués*

serving to execute colonial policy and acting in some ways as surrogate Belgians. After World War II, the status of *évolué* was officially recognized by the issuing of a *Carte de Mérite Civique*, obtained by virtue of a certain level of education, including literacy in French, and by the demonstration of an appropriate lifestyle. In analyzing the consequences of linking privileged status to Christianization, monogamy, and the adoption of an essentially Western way of life, Weiss concludes that "this pressure, applied at all levels was one of the reasons why the traditional leadership was so profoundly weakened in the Congo. Traditional leaders were, until very late, seen as the main carrier of pre-colonial African values" (134). Weiss goes on to rate Belgian rule as "the most assimilationist of all colonial rules" (135). When Ngal's post-independence intellectual seeks to reestablish contact with his lost traditions, it is hardly surprising therefore that he encounters resentment.

Whereas status under Belgian rule demanded a rejection of traditional values, efforts to rehabilitate African culture in the post-independence period became an important step in the process of creating a national identity. Mobutu's doctrine of "authenticity," a term in use as early as 1971, institutionalized this tendency: "The essence of authenticity was a return to the ancestral heritage as a spiritual resource. The goal of modernity was to be relentlessly pursued, but the alienating materialism of the Western world was to be averted through situating this quest within the moral framework bequeathed by the ancestors" (Young and Turner 211). As part of the process, European place names were replaced with African ones, and patriotic citizens were urged to adopt African dress. To a great extent, the events in Ngal's novel play out the drama of authenticity, with the guardians of tradition triumphing over the intellectual who, just a few years earlier, would have been able to gain entrance to the privileged class by rejecting his cultural heritage.

Another aspect of Viko's alienation stems from his own sense of being different by virtue of his education. Other African writers, as early as Camara Laye, have talked about the way in which the educated individual feels estranged from his or her culture, but the situation of the Zairian intellectual is distinctive. In contrast with those educational philosophies that prepared for ultimate self-rule in Britain's African colonies or for political integration in regions controlled by France, Belgium professed "no pretense or promise of either theoretical or symbolic equality for Africans" and emphasized

almost exclusively the economic development of the Congo (Markovitz 64). As Markovitz phrases it, "The Belgians prided themselves on not possessing basic philosophical principles. Rather, they maintained that their own colonial administration would be pragmatic and "empirical" (64). While the colonial government had early provided broad opportunities for education at the primary levels and eventually some secondary schools, there were no universities in the Congo until the fifties, and unlike Britain and France, Belgium did not send African students abroad. The scholarly elite that in Senegal produced Léopold Sédar Senghor was therefore virtually absent in the Congo where, at independence, there were only twenty university graduates. Even in the first decades after independence, the first generations of university graduates must have been inordinately conscious of the singularity and isolation of their situation, an awareness that must underlie any analysis of the theme of alienation not only in Ngal's work, but in all of the works included in this study.

The Colonial Power of the Church and the Dilemma of the African Priest

Even during the colonial period, one category of *évolués* was given an education equivalent in most respects to a university degree: the seminary student. At the time of independence, there were 500 Congolese priests in the Belgian Congo living on an equal footing with the white missionaries. According to Weiss, they constituted "the most prestigious elite group in the Congo until shortly before independence" (137). The Church, supported in its activities by the Belgian government, participated in the administration of the colony. In novels dealing with the period of independence and later, priests are inevitably assumed by the other characters to represent the colonial power, to be in the camp of the oppressor. Thus, in addition to being isolated from his community by virtue of his Western education, the priest is also alienated because of his association with the Church and because of the additional privileges he therefore enjoys.

Entre les eaux: Dieu, un prêtre, une révolution (1973) by V. Y. Mudimbe analyzes the inner conflict of an African priest whose theological training, including years of study in Rome, has made it impossible for him to relate to those to whom he is intended to minister. Seduced by Western culture—and by the relative comfort

accompanying his status—he nevertheless sympathizes with the plight of the people and leaves his order to join a Marxist revolutionary leader in the forest. In spite of the action stemming from rebel forays, the real subject of the novel is the internal dilemma of the priest, Pierre Landu, as he tries to decide between his duty to his people and the obligation he feels to the church, between conscience and comfort, between Marxism and Christianity. Key to the novel's effectiveness and to the portrait of the alienated intellectual is the attitude of the revolutionary group toward the priest. Rarely trusted, constantly spied upon, Landu is regarded as a symbol of the social injustice and unwarranted privilege upon which the revolution is based. The revolutionary leader doubts Pierre's commitment and accuses him of still being faithful to the church: "In spite of everything, the Jesuits are your real masters. And your drama is to be furthermore a black priest on top of a colonized intellectual" (57). When in a weak moment, Pierre transmits a letter to his bishop that is intercepted by the rebels, these suspicions appear to be confirmed, although Pierre has actually felt himself drawing closer to his comrades, and he condemns himself as a "traitor by predestination" (156). He defines the ambiguity of his situation: "Martyr of what cause? For Christianity, I had been a renegade for a long time. For the partisans, a poor guy, a traitor" (157). The priest loses all credibility, and the rebels marvel that he might once have been considered one of them. As for Pierre, even though he is rescued from his plight, he can no longer resume his previous situation as a priest, but neither is he tempted to rejoin the masses: "I loved and understood the poor uniquely through beautiful revolutionary books" (175). After failing to find equilibrium in marriage to an uneducated village girl, he finishes his life isolated in a Cistercian monastery. The revolution must take place without him. He has no place in it.

Mudimbe's novel takes place during the time when the Church still represented colonial authority; in Bolya Baenga's *Cannibale* (1986), the old associations between the Church and colonial exploitation are reaffirmed, but in a post-independence setting. In contrast with the reflective, new-novel style evidenced in the former, the latter is an ironic philosophical fable describing a mythical French-speaking country. Against a background of political corruption and ethnic rivalry, the black priest, Father Moussa, strives ineffectually to maintain Catholicism and his own peculiar interpretation of Western culture. Clearly out of harmony with the dominant

tendencies of his era, Moussa whiles away his empty hours with alcohol, drugs, and masturbation.

Although a pretentious individual whose largely superficial faith is nurtured by nostalgia for a past when he still enjoyed prestige as an ally of the white power structure, he seems so much more innocent and well-meaning than the other characters in the novel that it is almost impossible not to pity him as he suffers at the hands of the new political aristocracy who torture him, burn his church, and drag him as a hostage of sorts into the jungle on a fatal journey where all perish in a struggle animated variously by greed and a desire for vengeance. The origin of the hostility toward the priest is in part his previous association with the colonizer as the prefect, Makwa, proclaims, just before he orders the priest to be sodomized by one of his soldiers: "Colonization has died, you poor ass-kisser of the Whites! Died a long time ago, finished, buried. We are sovereign and independent." (61) The priest's humiliation symbolically represents the ascendancy of the new political class over the old elite; the prefect asserts: "You are about to experience the authority of the State through your ass" (62). The same accusation of collaboration that hampered Pierre Landu prevails well after the departure of the Europeans. The priest makes an easy target for residual resentment against the old order.

When the *Intellectual* Becomes the *Acquéreur* . . .

In addition to his role as a priest, Moussa, with all of his shortcomings, also represents education, culture, and ethical values, niceties that the state's new aristocracy no longer appreciates. He is at one point identified as "one of the last intelligent persons still alive in the country" (77). Continuing, the speaker regrets that "unfortunately we don't need that type of character." Elsewhere, a child declares: "They didn't chase the Whites out just to replace them with intelligent, competent, civilized Blacks" (79). While the mistreatment of the priest earlier in the novel clearly arose from his previous status under colonialism, the author subsequently makes it clear that the nation's leaders have a tendency to look unfavorably on all educated individuals: "The dictatorship of imbeciles first blames the intelligent Blacks. . . . They kill the intelligent people first!" (76).

In attributing the priest's marginalization to his intelligence and intellectual achievement as well as to his association with the church,

Bolya is reflecting another aspect of post-independence social dynamics. Whereas status in the colonial social structure depended almost exclusively on education, class affiliation in Zaire today has come to depend considerably more on wealth. In the following conversation between the priest and a businessman, Mubia, whose clan has just staged a coup placing itself in power, Bolya demonstrates the declining significance of education and Christian morality and the growing importance of the crudest, most vulgar pursuit of money:

“The only God that I venerate is money!” replied Mubia, lighting his Davidoff cigar.

“Everything is dying in this country, even things that should never die: moral values, Christian civilization, beauty, everything is fading!” said Father Moussa looking at his cassock in tatters and the crucifix of ebony wood on his breast.

“I agree with you, everything is dying, but the love of money remains! This sentiment will never disappear from the earth. (69–70)

The tension between these two points of view and the different interests they signify—as symbolized by the expensive cigar in contrast with the wooden cross—is also illustrated in the following Butembo parable gleaned by a Zairian researcher in 1980 and quoted by Young and Turner:

Once upon a time God, who created the world, decided to reward his sons living on this earth. He warned them in advance that he would throw down from heaven two packages containing the different rewards.

On the day agreed upon the packages were thrown down from heaven. The elder son rushed forward to the bigger package, leaving the smaller one to the younger son.

The two packages were opened in front of the assembly, [which was] filled with wonder. The bigger package contained French, a very good French. The smaller package contained money, a lot of money and the necessary skills to increase its amount.

The elder son is the ancestor of the intellectuals. These master French and speak a refined French, indeed. But they eat cow skin. The younger son is the ancestor of the traders. They

speaking little French, if any. But they were rewarded with the money and with the skills to increase its amount.

The history of Butembo is the history of a battle between these two packages. (100)

The struggle between French and money has been gradual, but the ascendancy has gone increasingly to the latter.

In the early years of nationhood when access to higher positions in the bureaucracy first became available, the top offices fell largely to the *évolué* class (Young and Turner 116). The term *évolué*, however, did not continue in use after independence and was replaced by the expression *intellectuel*. The latter did not carry the same meaning as the French word for "intellectual," used to refer to writers and scholars such as Ngal's Giambatista Viko or Mudimbe's Pierre Landu, but referred instead to clerks, technicians, and grade-school teachers and eventually came to denote the nation's new elite. The expression *intellectuel* would itself soon be replaced by yet another word as a form of referring to the privileged class: *acquéreur*. Not only were salaries of the new bureaucrats higher than anything to which an *évolué* might previously have been accustomed, but the new positions provided numerous opportunities for acquisition, particularly during the 1973 Zairianization of foreign-owned enterprises. Increasingly, wealth has become inextricably related to the holding of public office. Coming into office without an economic base, the ruling class has found it expedient to use its public functions as a means of personal gain. Corruption among holders of public office is further sanctioned by the patrimonialism of the Zairian political system, where "the political elite are tied to the ruler by links of individual clientage . . . the client has the right not only to hold office, but to exploit it for his own benefit" (Young and Turner 165). Shatzberg describes the consequences of such a system as follows: "In Mobutu's system of rule the powerful use political or administrative office to create wealth. This usually means officials exploit their power to extract what they can from those in contextually inferior positions in the social hierarchy and, in so doing, create new sources of scarcity" (135). Even President Mobutu has come to recognize the extraordinary venality fostered by the system, a phenomenon that he describes in this 1977 speech as "le mal zairois" 'the Zairian disease.'

Pius Ngandu Nkashama's *Le Pacte de sang* (1984) describes a

country in which a similar clique of privileged bureaucrats exploits a misery-laden populace. The country's poor subsist only by agreeing to purchase spoiled and contaminated food made available to them by members of the clique, who also traffic in human flesh. The *Clan des Seigneurs* is made up of a network of administrators, who assume as a matter of course that their budgets may be redirected for their own personal use. To maintain their control, the group operates a powerful security force with its brutal prison camp. Graft and bribery are standard practices. In contrast with this corrupt fraternity, Ngandu introduces an idealistic young professional, Doctor Chikuru, who comes fresh out of the university to head a psychiatric clinic. He is determined to change a situation that his predecessor had declared catastrophic. He believes that education is the answer to all problems and remains optimistic even though he had inherited a facility in deplorable condition. Worse, there are insufficient funds allotted to feed his patients, and even these arrive irregularly. Despite these conditions, he holds fast to his sense of purpose, but even Chikuru cannot cope with a scenario that becomes increasingly irrational. When he discovers that the clinic has been used clandestinely by members of the elite as a depot for selling young women to foreigners as prostitutes and that many have died on the premises from starvation before they could be transported, the absurdity and guilt become too much for him, and he quietly closes himself in his office and takes an overdose of insulin. The doctor's anguish arises not merely out of his aversion to human suffering—the dilemma of a rational, idealistic individual in an irrational world—but also out of his awareness that he has inadvertently contributed to evil in spite of his principles.

In choosing to confront *le mal zairois* with a humanitarian idealist who happens to be a doctor, Ngandu seems to be recalling Ngal's statement when questioned about the general relationship between the intellectual and Zairian society in a 1978 interview:

I define the intellectual in reference to society. The latter is ill, seriously ill. It has to be healed first. . . . Then, men must be healed. Perhaps we should first heal the men who could then undertake a social project where each individual, at the base as well as the top, assumes real responsibilities; where the administration is responsible for the public good; where the educational system, accompanied by a profound socio-economic reform, permitting not only the healthy management of public funds,

but also the equitable participation of the masses, of the middle class (currently non-existent), would function under a pedagogical regime more in keeping with economic realities, founded on the notion of the responsibility of each individual. (Ngal, "La Position des intellectuels zairois" 99)

Ngal, like Ngandu, also uses medical imagery and frames his response in such a way as to make the effectiveness of the intellectual contingent upon the solution of general social problems. Until that time, the role of the intellectual must necessarily be limited: "On the level of socio-economic structures, the intellectual is in general the frustrated man; a vulgar and triumphant materialism that fails to take into consideration any form of progress—social, cultural, intellectual—is dominant" (96). Against, *le mal zairois*, the intellectual stands helpless.

The Intellectual as Political Prisoner: The Frontlines of a Class Struggle

Ngal's reference to the absence of a middle class in Zaire, an observation supported by some political scientists (Callaghy 185–88), raises the problem of where to place the intellectual in the class structure. While the university professors writing these novels have certainly been the beneficiaries of some privileges, those in the humanities are generally situated on the lower edges of the ruling class, what Rymenam calls "the potential grande bourgeoisie" (Young and Turner 105). Young places them below the politico-commercial class—Callaghy's political aristocracy—but within a class of "other high-status groups" (121). Primary and secondary teachers and students in general belong to a group of yet lower status that Young and Turner term the "sub-bourgeoisie" and which they characterize as follows:

We would suggest that the distinguishing attributes of the salaried sub-bourgeoisie are life-style aspirations very similar to those of the politico-commercial class coupled with an ever-growing gap between hopes and reality, and their demarcation from the elite groups by a sharpening social closure. Socially expendable and politically powerless, they are at once frustrated and impotent. (122–23)

The terms “frustrated” and “impotent” would appear to apply to all of the intellectuals in this study, and generally, they are depicted less as members of the elite than people in opposition to it. This opposition is the most extreme, however, among characters who are indeed members of this sub-bourgeoisie, such as students and teachers. In *La Mort faite homme* (1986), Ngandu’s narrator, a medical student arrested in an anti-government protest, is telling his tale from a prison cell. The prison setting serves as a catalyst for the narrator’s monologue as he strives to survive his imposed solitude. He has been sentenced to a fifteen-year term as punishment for his participation in the demonstration in which a fellow student was shot to death, an event which might easily have been drawn from one of several such documented incidents. One of the persistent themes of the narrator’s monologues is that of the tragedy of wasted lives, both his own—deprived of any possibility of contributing to his community—and the life of his friend. He imagines the illnesses he might have cured as a doctor and the family life he will never know. Released unexpectedly before the end of his sentence, he is too marked by his experience to ever again participate fully in his society and refuses explicitly to serve in any way the government responsible for his plight. Some of his fellow prisoners have, in fact, been co-opted by the government and become enthusiastic members of the state security forces, the combination of repression and co-option effectively maintaining the power and position of the establishment. The narrator finally takes refuge in madness, the fate that Ngandu, writing elsewhere about African literature, feels awaits the intellectual in Africa today:

If therefore, between life and death, the [African] novel has chosen life, the most pressing problem remains that of the meaning to be given to that life. And the new mythologies of the “neo-colonial” regimes installed since independence have become involved in an obvious process of spiritual alienation. Alienation of conscience and spirit, whose most unexpected and most tragic effect is precisely the production of those bastardized intellectuals, whose existential itinerary leads to madness, to the “murky waters” of divided consciences, of “shattered souls.” (Ngandu, *Comprendre la littérature africaine* 9)

Both Dr. Chikuru in *Le Pacte de sang* (1984) and the narrator of *La Mort faite homme* dramatize Ngandu’s contention that the intellectual is psychologically incompatible with his or her milieu. Whether

he manages to gain a foothold on the edge of the privileged class as in the case of the doctor or whether he is subjected to the repressive measures of political authority, this situation is equally hopeless.

Conclusion

The intellectuals in all of these novels suffer from different sorts of alienation, but in each the alienation of the character stems from a common source: the shifting situation of the Zairian intellectual in the changing pattern of class structure during the post-independence period. In the transition from the colonial era—when privilege, determined by secondary education or clerical status, meant abandoning one's traditions—to the new nation state—where class has come to be determined chiefly by wealth, however obtained—the intellectual repeatedly finds himself deprived of the power to protect either his own interests or those broader interests relating to the general welfare of the society. The new political aristocracy, in consolidating its ranks, has pushed many intellectuals to the periphery of the upper class and into the sub-bourgeoisie, where living conditions are extremely difficult. Corruption and inequity are so consistently at odds with intellectual idealism that even those whose talent or situation offers them access to the privileged circle might be reluctant to become identified with it. The resulting tensions often provoke protests, especially among the ranks of students and teachers, that lead to repressive reactions on the part of the government. While characters in the novels are uniformly unable to act effectively within such a society and are all eventually silenced in some way—in exile, seclusion, death, madness, or prison—the very existence of the works themselves counteracts their pessimistic themes and testifies to the creative vitality that typifies the actual Zairian intellectual in contrast with his fictional counterpart. It is worth noting, however, that not one of the writers in this study is currently living in Zaire.

Notes

1. This paper was researched and written under the auspices of an NEH Summer Seminar on "Power and Class in Africa" and profited enormously from the insights of the participants, and especially from those of the director, Irving Leonard Markovitz.

2. The translations from both the novels and other works in French are my own. Of the authors treated here, only Mudimbe has benefited from translation into English. *Le Bel immonde* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976) has appeared as *Before the Birth of the Moon* (Trans. Marjolijn de Jager, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

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