

**BEYOND ELITE POLITICS:  
A COMMENT ON ERNEST WAMBA-DIA-WAMBA'S ESSAY  
"BEYOND ELITE POLITICS OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA"**

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What is at stake

As I understand it, the importance of Wamba's paper rests on calling into question not only politicians, but, more fundamentally, the conceptualization of both politics and institutions around which the democratization process in Africa has remained stuck. The problem which arises is that democratization cannot be reduced to how honest or accountable the politicians promise to be once in power. The question of democracy cannot be defined by the group, the party or the individuals whose democratic credentials only rest on their having fought against a dictatorial regime. Moreover, how parties or groups which challenge a dictatorship constitute themselves should be considered as an important issue, because the overthrowing of a dictatorial regime doesn't necessarily imply inner democratic structures.

Looking at the situation in Zaire, democracy cannot be reduced to an imposed choice between one extreme evil (Mobutu) and a lesser one (Tshisekedi). In other unpublished essays, Wamba (1993a, 1993b, 1993c) has illustrated this very point by showing how the debate over what is at stake in Zairian politics has been distorted by the contending forces. The issue cannot be reduced to just simply "getting Mobutu out of the way" as if it is unimportant how this is carried out and by whom. More seriously, the polarization that has been developed between Tshisekedi and Mobutu has facilitated the reproduction of State and Elite politics favourable to Mobutu's forces. Since the National Sovereign Conference was chaired by a catholic bishop, Monsengwo, it was a foregone conclusion that the deliberations would be conducted by someone who believed in Elite politics and the

maintenance of the State. Bishop Monsengwo belongs, after all, to a catholic Church which is run like a state, and hardly like a democratic one. The national Sovereign Conference showed in a very contradictory manner that emancipative politics do bring results, but if emancipative politics are going to be thoroughly liberating, then they have to be pursued to their ultimate conclusions...

In short, what is called for is a radical change in how power - economic and political - and its ancillary institutions (state, government, opposition parties) are conceptualized. If power is conceptualized for the liberation (emancipation) of the people and therefore by the people, then it would be a contradiction to seek to seize state power as it currently operates, since one would be going after, and valorizing something which is supposed to be dismantled. In Zaire, as in any other country, care must be taken 1) not to let those who have profited from the previous regime to define, even remotely or indirectly, the terms of reconciliation and reconstruction, and 2) the parties which are reconciling must all be clear about what they are reconciling over.

Wamba's call for Palaver Politics simply means reconstructing and practicing politics along institutional practices with which most Africans are familiar. It is western press which romanticized the National Conference by referring to it as the "Big African Palaver" [Braeckman (1991)]. For them the African Palaver still means "idle and endless talk". But, as Wamba is at pains to explain, the Palaver is much more than simply talking. It is a means through which all members of a community are engaged in resolving the problems of the community as seen, lived and experienced by the community as a whole. The Palaver is not just a non elitist mode of politics which is reproduced, but also and above all a mode of thinking about all aspects of life which affect the community.

In this holistic, communal understanding, the politics of the Palaver diminishes the individualistic tendencies for specialists and experts to forge special privileged roles for themselves. There is no

area which is beyond discussion. There is no area which is the exclusive privilege of experts [Wamba-dia-Wamba (1985)].

Wamba's contribution extends one of the most important aspects of Cheikh Ante Diop's work concerning the reconstruction of African societies. Basil Davidson's latest book [1992] points in the same direction, specifically in his case against the European curse of nation-statism which was imposed on Africa. For those who are sceptical only need to look at the histories of resistance during and after colonial rule: popular participation rooted in the political idiom and the cultural histories of people did produce momentary victories.

Another symptom of the changing times: some anthropologists [e.g. Geschiere (1982)] are finally looking at the Palaver as a serious form of living and conducting democracy. It should be obvious why anthropologists did not look at the Palaver as the core of democracy in African communities. To do so earlier, say during colonial ideology which portrayed European mission as an altruistic venture of bringing civilization and democracy to Africa. However, Palaver politics will be difficult to institutionalize if it is restricted to the political arena. It must be extended to the economic arena, a much more difficult, but not impossible task.

### Beyond Elite politics of knowledge

The question for a change towards a democratic, emancipative society could be put as follows: how do intellectuals make sure that, in their own arena, they do not reproduce politics of the state, non-emancipative politics. Insofar as the educational institutions operate according to rules and regulations emanating from the state, they will not encourage as a matter of course the politics of emancipative knowledge especially if such politics are aiming at producing scientists in all spheres, who are able to consider themselves as such, without the paralysing notions that they can only become scientists if they are approved by institutions established in Europe and, in general, in

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"more advanced industrialized countries". The mode of politics which Wamba castigates in relation to how to think about the State has to be extended into all of the areas which, in one way or another, are touched by the state mode of politics.

So how do intellectuals relate to the politics of the people. Insofar as post-colonial universities were the representation of the state, they also have constituted an arena from which to reproduce elite politics. How do we change the nature of institutions which were created to reproduce elite knowledge.

Wamba specifically calls for the democratization of knowledge. In the realm of knowledge, how is the State reproduced? Wamba's call for such a democratization must mean a questioning of the existing institutions, not just simply those of higher learning, but also those which prepare the ground for entry into universities.

To call for a process of democratization of knowledge obviously means more than simply trying to reorganize within the current existing system. How are intellectuals going to break from the practices which were imported from outside? Ironically such a break is taking place as teachers at all levels have to operate outside the academic confines in order to make ends meet, but these practices do not break from the old patterns, they, in fact, reproduce them because, in the process the main preoccupation is "to make ends meet". Everyone fending for themselves and treating the educational process as a task which is satisfied bureaucratically.

The question is often asked, "fine, but what do we do, where do we start?" Just as the question of how to deal with a state which has been moulded by 30 years of crime and looting from within and from outside calls for rethinking the state, likewise one should rethink of what goes on inside the institutions of learning. It is not just a question of rearranging the subjects and disciplines, it is a question of rethinking which education, for whom, for what and by whom? It is often forgotten that when the missionaries came, it took them a long time to produce engineers and medical doctors, but very quickly they had

produced seminarists, priests, theologians, philosophers, classical philologists, bishops, cardinals.

The other question which is often implicit is "where are we going to get the resources?" Often "resources" is understood as grants coming from foundations in the North. Very rarely is resources understood as the result of what we can produce. Intellectually we need to free ourselves from professor C.Y. Thomas' famous definition of underdevelopment: "producing what we do not consume and consuming what we do not produce".

There is no ready made recipe for how an economy is going to be rebuilt so that it serves the interests of the producers and not those who believe in the dogma of private property and the sacro-sanct catechism of the market forces. Such a recipe will come out of developing radically different modes and practices of production and reproduction of knowledge.

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