

## Neo-liberalism and the Declining Reading Culture at African Universities: Reflections on Social Responsibility of Intellectuals

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### Abstract

*In the 1960s and 1970s there were lively and fervent intellectual debates and discussions at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. The debate revolved around how Africa could extricate itself from the barbaric capitalist socio-economic system. It was pioneered by the radical wing of the University students who, partly, sought to transform the erstwhile colonial education system whose purpose was mental enslavement into the socialist education for liberation of mankind. Today, not only that such a debate has fizzled out, but more importantly, the paucity of the culture of reading has characterised the entire educational system in Tanzania. The purpose of this article is to highlight the social factors responsible for this state of affairs. It is claimed that the onslaught of the neoliberal policies pursued by monopoly capital through its financial institutions, namely the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and in collaboration with the compradorial ruling classes in African countries, have been the principal forces responsible for the process of undermining the education system in Africa in general, and Tanzania and Nigeria in particular. In Tanzania today, for example, in contrast to the aims and ethos of the Arusha Declaration and the policy of Education for Self-reliance, the education system is for preparing candidates for the labour market, and hence, for subordination, exploitation, and the generation of mental confusion. The paper ends up by one, calling upon the left intellectuals in Africa to do a “rethinking” of the said issue, and two, by suggesting a tentative programme for reviving the culture of reading in Africa.*

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, commoditisation of education, the decline of the culture of reading

## **Introduction:**

*“Education aims at explaining the facts of life and the way wealth is created. The explanation of these facts gives us our views on social questions. Therefore, those who control education control our actions since actions are guided and determined by our view of the facts. In such a view, the interests of labour and capital are opposed. Education is therefore, the armoury for both parties and this education is just as partisan as the parties it seeks to arm.”— G. Emam*

The functions of education in any one given society are basically twofold: one, is that, it promotes the development of the productive forces and this is effected mainly through the transmission and expansion of scientific knowledge and technical skills from one generation to another. Contrary to what bourgeois ideologues profess, even this “purely” technical function of education has, embedded in it, a social aspect. For one thing, in so far as it promotes the creation of wealth – the surplus product of which is appropriated by the dominant social classes – education, therefore, can’t play a neutral role. This is precisely because its technical function or role is in a dialectical relationship with its ideological function. An example will suffice here.

At the height of the literacy campaigns in the early 1970s in Tanzania, one of the publications in the series of primers published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) literacy project in the country, one of the titles used by the trainees included “Good Family Care”. The said primer dealt with the general curative and preventive measures whose purpose was to promote the development of a healthy family. One of the topics concerned with the importance of taking nutritious food stuffs including fruits and one of the paragraphs read as follows:

- “Fruits keep the body healthy
- Vegetables and maize prevent diseases from attacking the body
- Mangoes, pawpaws, and guava prevent skin diseases
- They also prevent eye diseases
- We should take fruits frequently
- We should take oranges, pawpaws, guavas, mangoes and bananas.”

At the level of appearances, the paragraph is very innocent whose main message is to “educate” the trainees on the importance of taking nutritious food stuffs so as to keep their bodies in good health, and therefore, less susceptible to diseases. However, the paragraph remains

silent and hence apologetic as long as it does not ask the fundamental question: if it is true that some of the diseases which affect the majority of the people in Tanzania are due to the lack of nutritious food, why is it that the (people) are deprived of the same? Granted that at least a tiny section of the population in Tanzania - the minority who constitutes the fat cats of the society – is abundantly supplied with the fruits, why is it that the same is not true of the majority of the peasants who do produce them?

The question of the distribution of the social product is a class question and as such it cannot be solved by simply exhorting the victims to take nutritious foods in a situation and under conditions in which they cannot even provide themselves with their staple food. In the Tanzanian social context, where fruits have acquired the status of a commodity, and whereby commodity production, marketisation and privatisation of the commons are increasingly being generalised, one's ability to acquire commodities such as fruits is determined by one's class position. For an ordinary member of the working class in the city of Dar-es-Salaam, for example, such commodities like mangoes, pineapples and guava can hardly feature in his/her daily diet given that he/she goes without sufficient food for a number of days in a month.

The upshot of all this is that the dominant, though not pervasive, capitalist relations of production and their corollary, namely, the commodity relations in Tanzania are justified, and herein lies the ideological content of the literacy classes. By refraining from interrogating these relations of production, the literacy classes necessarily and inevitably serve the purpose of essentially reproducing them; and this goes on to demolish the widely spread view which seeks to advance that technical education can be separated from politics.

The second function of education is that it contributes, in the realm of social consciousness, the reproduction of the existing dominant social relations of production: it imparts into its subjects the cultural norms, attitudes and values of the dominant social classes. In a class society like Tanzania and the rest of the African countries, therefore, education is a means of social control and a bond which holds together the societies which are internally differentiated. It is also a means of legitimation and this is manifested in educational differences which are a means for justifying social inequalities. Under capitalism this function has been institutionalised and the school system is just one of the many institutions which, in addition to its technical role, socialises the young into the social system. Speaking on

the ideological function of the school system in Tanzania and under capitalism in general, Hirji had this to say:

*“It promotes, refines and gives newer expression to the dominant ideology. It imparts this to the young minds, teaches them to accept and fit into the existing state of affairs, disciplines them, and imbues them with respect for authority, i.e. for the dominant social classes and their representatives.”* (Hijri, 1973:13).

Since to appropriately discuss the nature of education under capitalism would entail first to discuss the capitalist labour-process and the associated detail division of labour which takes place in a workshop where commodity production is subdivided into a manifold operation, a process which would be far beyond the purview of this paper, at this juncture it is enough to state a number of negative consequences of capitalism on workers' education. First and foremost, the capitalist class, through the management, robs the working class of the benefits of science and technology and does concentrate into itself that knowledge. Armed with this knowledge the capitalist is then able to separate conception from execution. In this way, the study of the work process is:

*“reserved to management and kept from the workers, to whom its results are communicated only in the form of simplified job tasks governed by simplified instructions which it is henceforth their duty to follow unthinkingly and without comprehension of the underlying technical reasoning and data”* Braverman (1974:8).

Secondly, the detail division of labour cheapens the training costs of the capitalist. Training of a labourer while participating in the process of production is not peculiar to capitalism, in actual fact it is common to all societies known in history. What is peculiar to capitalism with respect to training is the shift of training the worker from the work place to the educational institutions. This is one of the points discussed by Athar Hussein (1976:425) where he argues that:

*“..... since apprenticeship under artisan production is training for what is going to be a life-long occupation of the labourer, while apprenticeship under capitalism, in actual fact means training for an occupation which overtime either becomes*

*absolute (due to technical change) or redundant (due to change in the composition of production).*

...the correlate between these two factors and unemployment (which is endemic to the capitalist system) does explain the division of labour between educational institutions and the work place and the shift of training a worker shifting from an individual capitalist to the whole capitalist class through public schools which are state subsidised.

The shift for training from the work place to educational institutions has also a number of negative consequences for the working people: one of them is that the separation of theory from practice becomes exacerbated. This is more so when we consider that under capitalism the educational institutions have no bearing whatsoever with the occupational requirements in the economy. Secondly, and this is important for our discussion, the content of primary and secondary school education – where the future workers are educated – is so empty that there are cases in Tanzania where after twelve years of elementary education students leave the school with no basic skills of literacy (Sweezy & Baran, 1966; Braverman, 1974; Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Since education, therefore, does not stand above society its analysis necessarily calls for a class analysis of a given social formation; for it is only by doing so that one can concretely answer such questions as: “knowledge of what, for what purpose and for whose benefit?” It is only from this perspective that we can proceed in analysing the nature of education in contemporary Africa.

The locus of this paper is not to examine the social and political aspects of school education in Africa, although the two aspects are just as important. The principal aim is to highlight – albeit in a sketchy manner – the social forces which have been responsible for the deterioration and elimination of the culture of reading in Africa, taking Tanzania and Nigeria as a case study. What is argued in this paper is that the onslaught of the neoliberal policies which have been sponsored by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have subverted the institutions of higher learning by commercialising them thereby eroding African intellectuals of their primary concern and social responsibility to the African people. As a result, the African intellectuals have been robbed of their capacity of how to transform African social formations with a view to transcending the current global and barbaric capitalist socio-economic system. Compared to the 1960s and 1970s, today, the African education system is in shambles, it is

not meant to equip students with the necessary tools of analysis as well as socially relevant conceptual categories so as to master knowledge necessary for the emancipation of the labouring people, rather the purpose is to mould them into *commodities*, that is, to prepare them for the *labour market* without any long-term consideration of *national* and *societal needs*. The deleterious impact and effect of the *commoditisation of education* in Africa has been manifested in different forms, one of which being the widespread phenomenon of the paucity of the culture of reading which is seen amongst the majority of students at all levels of the education system: primary school, secondary school through to the university.

Education is a process which normally entails an interpersonal relationship between a teacher and a student. It is a process of becoming, and evolution of identity whereby the one being educated develops a sense of one's self. It involves an interactive exchange of philosophies, ideas, theories and perspectives between the parties based on mutual recognition. On the other hand, a commodity is anything which is produced for purposes of exchange. The commoditisation of education means the interruption of this education process but more importantly the disintegration and distillation of the education experience into "discrete, reified, and ultimately sealable things."

With commoditisation of education, attention is normally shifted from the experiences of the people involved in the education process to the production of an assortment of fragmented course materials such as lesson plans, lectures, examinations and syllabi. Second, these fragments are removed from their producer, that is, the teachers, and the end result is that the process of instruction gets transformed into a set of deliverable commodities for making money at the expense of self-knowledge. Hence, teachers become producers of commodities and students become consumers. The overall purpose of the education system, therefore, becomes capital accumulation on the part of the owners of the school institutions.

It is a well-known fact that social consciousness is the totality of views, ideas, and social feelings of a particular class that reflects its social being and that the consciousness of the society in which an individual lives influences his spiritual world. However, the social nature of consciousness is also expressed in its unity with *language*. This unity results from the fact that language is the immediate reality of human consciousness. Language is a material manifestation of human thought. Man may express his ideas by different means (gestures, drawings, formulas, etc.,) but ultimately, however, human intercourse is based on verbal language. Consciousness

does not exist outside language/speech; there is a unity between thought and language. Consciousness reflects reality while language expresses the results of this reflection. The basic function of *consciousness* is *cognition of reality* and that of *language* – communication and mutual understanding between people.

In the Tanzania situation, whereby there are ruptures in the language of instruction from mother tongue to Kiswahili and from Kiswahili to English, the process of cognition of social reality becomes impaired. At the secondary and University levels, students are disabled to think as the English language is alien to them. However, since the bulk of theoretical and technical knowledge is in English, students resort to memorisation, thereby becoming copy cats. And since cognitive ability is a mental process which can only be acquired through the process of abstraction, through a language, and given the simple fact that they have been able to pay the necessary fees to the school institution, they are necessarily entitled to get the corresponding exchange-value, namely, grades and certificates. The owners of the school institutions have capitalised on this fact. Herein lies the centrality of commoditisation of the education system in Tanzania: the phenomenon of “tuition”, the proliferation of private primary, secondary and universities – all in unison – have had the primary of purpose of getting money-capital on the part of the owners for *accumulation purposes* of wealth in the form of capital and not for imparting knowledge into the trainees.

In the prevailing neo-capitalist economy and conditions whereby wealth acquisition has become the hallmark of one’s social standing, where certificates have become the gateway to getting employed, where corrupt practices and other vices have become rampant, where nepotism is the order of the day and above all, where political connections are a necessary conditions for getting privileges, knowledge and skills have necessarily been relegated to the background as important qualification for employment.

### **The University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania**

During the late 1960s and the 1970s, there was a lively intellectual fervent at the University of Dar-es-Salaam – a fervent, which was all pervasive: it involved not only students but also members of the academic staff. Every occasion, be it a normal seminar discussion or an event such as a publication, all were a forum for ideological struggle: students were locked in ideological confrontations which were based largely on the two philosophical systems and standpoints, namely, bourgeois and materialist world views. Pioneered by the radical wing of the University community,

the concern of the students was how to transform the capitalist system into a socialist one. They were concerned with how to solve social problems of the masses, particularly the abysmal conditions of the people in Africa; issues of social inequality (gender, class, ethnic, cultural, national, economic, social, political etc.); peace and security as well as environmental destruction occasioned by the capitalist system.

Academic and political debates concerned with emancipator politics which would lead to transformations of societies and hence where one's humanity would not be contested, were the norm. Critiques of reality from the point of view of liberation from exploitation and domination of all forms were fashionable. Hence, more importantly, this was the time when students read voraciously and debated intensively. After every lecture, for example, students would rush to the Main University Library and ceaselessly comb the library shelves and stacks for reading materials, digest, synthesize them and finally present their findings in the next seminar presentations. It was embarrassing for one (of whatever ideological persuasion) to present (in a class or seminar) a purely descriptive paper which is not informed by any relevant social theory or one without supporting one's arguments with reliable sources and references (authorities) as this would definitely call forth fiery counter arguments from the radical students.

One of the most outstanding characteristics of the period, however, was that this was the time during which commitment to the cause of the exploited and the oppressed i.e. "The Wretched of the Earth" *a la* Frantz Fanon, was upper most in the minds of the radical students and one can convincingly state that this was one of its greatest strengths. This contrasts quite sharply with the current period – as I will have occasion to demonstrate later on in this essay.

It may appear trite and probably quite unnecessary to state that books and other reading materials are necessary, though not sufficient condition for effective learning. Then, the University libraries as well as the University bookshop were well stocked with essential and subsidiary reading materials, and students could not complain of paucity of them. During those days, students did not get their book allowances in cash, rather, the practice was that every student had an account with the bookshop and professors used to recommend to the students what to purchase. In contrast to the olden times, today, many students do not possess a single text on their various courses that they have opted; at most, they have photocopied materials (*madesa*) – either in wholes or in part – specifically for answering examination questions. Given the exorbitant prices of books,



coupled with the fact that the book allowances provided to students are grossly inadequate, expecting students to purchase reading materials is to expect too much from them.

There is an additional dimension to the problem, namely, that while during the material time the olden time students were keen to learn and hence would spend whatever little cash they had to purchase books, today, producing or purchasing these materials is not students' priorities at all. Inadequate as it may be, nowadays, book allowances are not used to purchase reading materials; rather it is diverted to other pressing or otherwise uses/ needs. Most frequently, students would photocopy certain aspects of notes in class or textbook and spend the rest of their monies to other things.

Probably it may not be off point if one would suggest that the structure of some of the courses were a factor or an occasion which facilitated student radicalism at the Hill: the inter-disciplinary nature of some courses particularly in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. A course such as "East African Society and Environment Course" which was a faculty course was structured in such a way that social phenomena was studied holistically and as such students had the benefit of acquiring knowledge in its full form and not compartmentalised in neat, independent and isolated units as is the case today.

While the above could be regarded as the internal factors – specific to the University – there were, however external ones which heavily influenced student radicalism, and this is no other than the international situation. The Vietnam war, the Chinese cultural revolution, the 1968 student upheaval in European cities, the wars of liberation against Portuguese and the Apartheid regime in Africa, were some of the key factors which ignited the revolutionary spirit and ferment among progressive students at the Hill.

Let me highlight – albeit in a sketchy manner- the necessary social conditions which were at work for the rise of student radicalism at the Hill and likewise to account for its down fall in the subsequent period.

### **Radicalism at the University (the Hill): The historical antecedents**

The rise of student revolutionary spirit and movement at the hill was not a fortuitous nor a natural phenomenon which dawned upon the militants, which could be likened to "manna" from Heaven, rather it was a result of certain basic contradictions then reigning in Tanzania in particular and the

international scene, in general and ones which required to be resolved. The resolution of these contradictions, therefore, required intense struggles. Accounting for the factors that induced him to join the Hill and not any other college and reflecting on the end of his three-year undergraduate stay at the University College of Dar-es-Salaam, Yoweri Museveni (the current President of Uganda), had this to say:

*“It was Dar-es-Salaam’s atmosphere of freedom fighters, socialists, nationalisation, anti-imperialism that attracted me rather the so-called academicians”* (Museveni, 1970).

Then he continues to register his disappointment upon his arrival as an undergraduate student in July 1967, and he states:

*“I was, almost immediately disappointed on arrival at the College. I found that the students were lacking in militancy and were even hostile, not only to socialism, but even, at least some of them, to the whole question of African liberation. At any rate, there was no clear, militant commitment on the part of the broad sections of the student body. Instead, most of our extra-curricular time was taken up by frivolous activities: drinking, dancing and watching decadent Western films”* (Museveni, 1970:3).

It was from such a lackadaisical atmosphere prevailing amongst the broad sections of the student community that militants like Hirji, Museveni, Shivji, Mapolu, Meghji and others initiated ideological struggles against what they labelled as reactionaries- both students as well as members of the academic staff. It was the realisation of the fact that University students were apathetic, non-committal and hence socially irresponsible towards the labouring masses in Africa that militants initiated measures to rectify the situation. It is the constellation of the opposing forces and ensuing struggles, which eventually led to the establishment of University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF) and which in collaboration with TANU Youth League branch established *Cheche [The Spark]* – as their magazine.

It was mainly due to ideological confusion then prevailing on the campus, and probably due to “amateurishness and the political outlook” - to use Stalin’s words - and the need to link and ideologically unite the disunited militants, with a view to flaming up a revolutionary spirit, and conflagration that the militants founded *Cheche*.

The principal agenda which informed the materials published in *Cheche* and the subsequently, *MajiMaji*, was the liberation of humankind from the yoke of capitalism and imperialism. And proceeding from the premises that insurrection of arms must be preceded by insurrection of ideas, their role as intellectuals as opposed to intellect workers (*a la* Baran) was, to transcend the narrow and specialised fields of knowledge characteristic of the bourgeois Universities. The approach enables the intellectual to perceive the interrelationship between and among phenomena in a holistic manner – a feature, which marks him off from the intellect worker. And hence, the axiom: the whole is the truth. Furthermore, the militants argued that the search for truth is only one of the essential qualities of an intellectual; the others are commitment, readiness and courage to “undertake ruthless criticism of everything that exists” (Marx), which in turn, demands a social conscience and a dedication to a cause in the interest of humanity.

It is no wonder, therefore, throughout their lifespan; both magazines published high quality materials from both students and lecturers. For example, *Cheche's* special issue on “Tanzania: The Silent Class Struggle” by Issa G. Shivji (1969) and *MajiMaji's* special issue no.17 “The Workers Revolution in Tanzania: Labour Unrest and the Quest for Workers’ Control in Tanzania” by Paschal Mihyo (1974) testify to this. An article by Walter Rodney titled “High jacking: A Revolutionary Method” published in *MajiMaji* no.15, July 1974, testifies to the degree of independence which the militant students had. In this article, Rodney justifies the tactics of high jacking planes, which was in vogue by then, and he does so from the point of view of the oppressed. Rodney argues that in a class society in which there are oppressor/oppressed and the exploiter/exploited, the struggle for dominance by one over the other is inherently acute. Wherever there is exploitation and oppression, there is also resistance. While the exploiter would always like to maintain and perpetuate the exploitative system, likewise, the exploited would always use all kinds of techniques to resist it, and this is borne out by history. Citing high jacking incidents done by the Latin American and Palestinian revolutionaries, he argues that these events are expressions of exploitation and oppression and he calls for recognition of their rights and that the use of force was legitimate:

*“Since then the Arabs have had a miserable existence, they have lived in refugee camps while depending on food rations. The Palestinians are demanding their rights as human beings but also as people indigenous to their own land. Never do they demand the expulsion of the Jews who came to Israel. What they*

*say is that a community based on Socialism and equality is supposed to be established in that area*

*It is imperative that an examination of plane hijacking in the Middle East be done on the basis of human rights principles, socialism and equality - principles which are enshrined in the "Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine" which is the organisation fighting for the liberation of Palestine and for realising the objectives of the Palestinian people. The hijacking of planes is a method of realising the objective of the Palestinian people, the objective of liberating their land from the Jews. This is how things should be viewed and they should not be seen as stupid expressions initiated by stupid people." (Rodney, 1974). [My own translation].*

In the present social context, whereby there is a worldwide campaign against the so-called terrorism, and the associated terrorism acts in many countries in Africa including Tanzania, one wonders what would be the reaction from the powers that be if such an article was published in a university student magazine in Tanzania today. What would be the response, say, from the British and American embassies? Would the respective university administration keep mum?

Thus, at the national level, the role of student radicals - through their mouthpieces of *Cheche* and *MajiMaji* - had been to raise and discuss wide-ranging issues that arose since the promulgation of the Arusha Declaration of 1967 that proclaimed socialism as its goal and the TANU Guidelines (*MWONGOZO*) of 1971. It must be remembered that the Arusha Declaration was the turning point in the political development of our country as it imbued the people - and particularly the youth - with the zeal and interest to start thinking seriously about socialism. While initially, the enthusiasm hinged upon the nationalisation of both local and foreign capital, the essence as well as the various forms of exploitation and oppression/domination had to be exposed. The student magazines played a seminal role in exposing the limited role of nationalisation, as by its very nature it does not end exploitation; on the contrary, exploitation may simply take a new guise while it remains intact in essence, and it may even be accentuated as it was the case in Tanzania. The various contributions such as Shivji's (1969) "Tanzania: the silent class struggle" unmasked the various forms of exploitation - many of which are very subtle - that goes under the cloak of joint ventures, management and consultancy agreements,

trademarks and patent rights, tourism, foreign trade, and loans (see also Shivji, 1973).

Needless to say that the basic ideas of the bulk of the articles, which these magazines published, represented the general ideological stand of progressive students and academic staff on the campus – a stand which was a culmination of ideological debates and fierce struggles. For example, the contribution by Karim Hirji (1973) which sought to analyse the colonial nature of the Tanzanian education system and hence the politically sensitive nature of its contents, received a very cold and negative response from the powers that be. As a consequence, Karim who by then had been employed as an assistant lecturer in the Department of Mathematics, University of Dar-es-Salaam, had his employment terminated by the Government, which in turn, rusticated him to Sumbawanga where he became a planning officer. The above, therefore, constitutes a modest appraisal of the role played by militant students in the process of furthering the cause of the poor in our country. In actual fact, in my opinion, they were concretely putting into practice the conception and role of a university as defined by Nyerere (1973: 192-193).

*“Thus our university, like all others worth the name, must provide the facilities and the opportunities for the highest intellectual inquiry. It must encourage and challenge its students to develop their powers of constructive thinking. It must encourage its academic staff to do original research and to play a full part in promoting intelligent discussion of issues of human concern. It must do all these things because they are part of being a university; they are part of its reason for existence”.*

- Nyerere, 1973

According to him, the university is a place where people should be “trained clear thinking, for independent thinking, for analysis and for problem solving at the highest level”. Nyerere goes on to state that the functions of a university are threefold: “the transmission of knowledge so that it could serve as a basis for action or as a springboard for further research... through its possession of a good library and laboratory facilities and finally to provide high level manpower to society” (Nyerere, 1973:193). He ends up by stating that a university, which prohibits any of these functions, should die – it would cease to be a university.

### **The times of neo-liberalism**

At the level of theory, neo-liberalism takes the view that individual liberty and freedom are the high point of civilization. Furthermore, it argues that individual liberty and freedom can best be protected and achieved by establishing institutional structures, which are made up of strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. That it is only within such an environment that individual initiative can flourish. The implication of this assumption is that the state should not involve itself too much in the running of the economy, rather it should create an “enabling environment”, which means, it should use its power to preserve and promote private property rights and the institutions of the market (Harvey, 2005; Wood, 1994; Polanyi, 1975).

In Tanzania, the neo-liberal policies, which were initiated in the mid-1980s, have created havoc in the education system. The World Bank and its neo-liberal ideologues argued that education financing in Africa was unbalanced and that investment in higher education was inefficient. For example, Michael Kelly (1991:7) went to the extent of stating that “wastage, proliferation of small institutions, excessively large (especially non-teaching) staff and the nearly universal policy of charging no fees all contribute to high costs”. Since then there was a dramatic shift in the World Bank priorities and for it higher education was no longer one of its priorities particularly when it was observed that NGOs were doing “better” without people with PhDs.

Thus, the World Bank called for a major restructuring of the education system, which should involve cost sharing and that institutions of higher learning should exist by virtue of being “efficient” and “viable”. Chachage (2007:56) argues that “By viability was meant the institutions should ‘produce’ for the ‘market’ and pay for themselves”; and the introduction of cost sharing was part of this scheme. He goes on to state that, “By efficiency was meant revising syllabi to ensure ‘products’ are better suited for the market”. This, therefore, constitutes the historical and social context within which higher education was drawn into the market i.e. a commodity, which can be sold and bought like an ice cream from an ice cream parlour.

There is an interesting and intriguing question to pose here: is it true to think and state that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund imposed such obnoxious policies on Tanzania as some have tended to claim? I don’t think so. What happened was that when the financial multinational corporations were putting pressure on the then Nyerere’s government in the early 1980s, political elite inside the Tanzanian state

seized the opportunity to say “yes” to the Bank’s conditionalities as they served its interests as well (Mtei, 2009:151). The conditionalities gave expression to a certain *political line* which was in congruence with the elites’ interests. This is well expressed in the encounter between Nyerere and Mr Mtei, the then Governor of the Central Bank of Tanzania. Mr. Mtei was one of the leading and upcoming members of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie toeing the capitalist line. In September 1979, in accompaniment with Bo Karlstrom, a senior member of staff of the African Department of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), he led the team to President Nyerere’s Msasani Residence with a view to persuading him to accept the “proposals” of reviving the Tanzanian economy which, among other things, included a programme of adjustment measures: devaluation of the Tanzanian shilling, and reforming the parastatal institutions, both of which the President rejected. Mtei recounts the incidence, and the President’s rebuttal in the following terms: “..... When I was able to talk with him, he indicated that he considered the visitors were insolent, and added that *he would never allow his country to be run from Washington. He told me to tell them to go back to Washington.*”

Mtei’s embrace of the infamous neoliberal IMF conditionalities was a political line, which would enable the political elites in Tanzania to express themselves freely, without being subjected to the constraints enshrined in the principles of the Arusha Declaration of 1967, and *Mwongozo Guidelines* of 1971. In other words, he represented the interests of the “capitalist roaders” inside the Tanzanian state bureaucracy - similar to those who emerged in China under the leadership of Teng Hsiao-ping after the death of Mao Tse-tung in 1976 – who came to dominate the state machinery, thereby ushering in the infamous neo-liberal policies in the education sector in the mid-1980s.

In practical terms, at the university level, this has meant the production of “marketable” courses and graduates at the expense of *academic excellence*. Consequently, given such an environment, from the point of view of students, university education has been equated to a simple matter of getting *degrees* and *certificates*. That is why, today, students are not keen to learn; rather they are more interested in getting grades (marks) than in critically reflecting on what they read!

My own experience in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, an experience shared by other academics as well, is that teaching has been quite an extremely frustrating and enervating experience on my part, on account of the

principal reason being that students do not want to read. They have a very strong aversion to books and reading! Taking an analogy, one would state that they equate books to a “mother-in-law” – one of the most respected and revered persons in the traditional African customs and traditions – and one who most invariably needs to be kept at a social distance as customarily it is a taboo for the son-in-law to come closer to her.

Conscious of the paucity of the essential reading materials in the University library, sometimes I would photocopy materials for them or download others from the internet. Alas, despite all these efforts, and to my surprise, only a handful of “serious” students would find the time to read them. The rest would not as they tended to regard it as a bother on their part! On several occasions I have been perplexed to come across students, who in the course of my discussions with them, they would remark, with no qualms at all, that they did not join the University to acquire knowledge, rather, their objective was simply to acquire certificates. Similarly, many students were surprised to see me paying regular visits to the University Main Library for reading materials as if I were a student!

Lastly, the majority of students do not attend lectures. And yet, lectures are an occasion where the main subject matter of a topic is outlined and the future direction of the same is delineated. A student who misses lectures stands to miss the inner kernel of the subject matter under discussion; and however much one may use lecture notes or the so-called *madesa* (hand-outs), one stands to suffer intellectually. Worse still, whenever students come for consultations, it is not issues revolving around *theories* and *perspectives* that are raised for discussion; rather, it is the issue of *how to answer* a particular question and this has been their principal preoccupation. Apparently, most of their discussions conducted at the *mdigrii* (a famous tree at the University of Dar es Salaam Main Campus), seminar rooms or elsewhere have been of this nature. Given such a scenario under the current prevailing social circumstances, it is only logical to expect many students to be *anti-intellectual* as is the case today.

### **Sociology students at UMYU, Katsina, Nigeria**

In the *Weekend Trust* of 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2013, there appeared a feature article titled “The waning reading culture among Nigerian youngsters” authored by one Jalaludeen Ibrahim Maradu. In the article, the author decried what he describes as the “scrawny” reading culture in Nigeria and spells out some of the attempts made in heartening the cultures of reading. He goes on to note, for example, that the establishment of a number of literary clubs in a number of Nigerian cities such as Abuja, Kano, Port Harcourt and Lagos, as well as



the effort made by the President Jonathan in 2010 when he launched the “Bring Back the Book” initiative, as attempts to rectify the poor reading culture in Nigeria. To what extent these efforts have had a positive impact on enhancing the reading culture in the country this is a difficult question but one which needs to be addressed.

In Nigeria the last twenty years or so of neoliberal policies was similarly the period during which public educational institutions, including public libraries, were neglected by the state. According to ‘The sorry state of national, state libraries’ published in the *Weekly Trust*, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2013, the authors lament the manner in which the use of public libraries is on the decline in Nigeria. They note that for the previous twenty years public libraries have been underfunded, the consequence of which there have been no new supply of books and other essential reading materials, dilapidated structures have not been repaired, and similarly, reading tables and other facilities have not been adequate. They cite the Niger State Library, the Stella Obasanjo library in Kogi, the Benue State Library in Makurdi and the Nasarawa State Library as typical cases.

My three year stay in the Department of Sociology, Umaru Musa Yar’adua University, Katsina in Nigeria, has taught me one thing; that, like their counterparts in Tanzania in terms of their attitude to books, students in the Department of Sociology, UMYU, are no qualitatively different: essentially they share common characteristics but with one difference. While those in Tanzania would feel extremely apprehensive and remorse about the mere prospect for being expelled from the University, or for carrying over a course on account of academic failure, as academic failure is associated with stigma, frivolousness and crass irresponsibility on the part of the student, a positive attitude towards reading and thinking would, most frequently, tend to evolve and emerge amongst them. Contrarily, sociology students at UMYU, however, appear to be adamant. Several attempts at cajoling them, coupled with my conscious attempts to provide them with copies of essential reading materials for the two courses which I taught during the first semester after my arrival, the results had been extremely dismal and disappointing. Except for a few, the majority appeared to be nonchalant. They were not only hostile to books, but also during lecture sessions, the majority of students did not take down notes. At one time, for example, copies of Frederick Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, together with Roy Bhaskar’s *A Realist Theory of Science*, were handed over to the class representative for students to reproduce as they constituted essential reading materials. The majority of students refused not only to photocopy the materials for various reasons;

they went on to the extent of even boycotting some of the lecture sessions. Instead, only a few and serious students attempted to pursue the course diligently. Anecdotal evidence had it that some of the political science students, for example, were claimed to have regretted having opted for the sociology course, claiming for what they stated to be a too- demanding a posture on the part of the course lecturer. Their main complaint was stated to be “too much work”. They ostensibly felt to be overburdened with so many reading materials as if they were postgraduate students undertaking a Master’s Degree course! Others had even threatened never again to opt out sociology courses in the forthcoming second semester session of 2013/2014. The overriding fact was that students were decidedly hostile to books, and hence *anti-intellectual*.

Be that as it may! What does all this amount to? The point is that with the onslaught of the neo-liberal policies in Africa, education has been devalued, extroverted, and downgraded. Consequently, independent thinking has been subverted and hence thrown overboard. What has been taking place at the school/university level is a reflection of what has been taking place at the higher level, namely, at the national level. Thus, the kinds of relations of domination which exist between the Western bourgeois scholars and those of the underdeveloped countries have been accentuated, and this has led to a national disaster. As intellectuals, we have abdicated our social responsibility to the African masses. For example, in the process of conducting our intellectual activities, we have been fostering – unintentionally or unconsciously - a social system for the reproduction of mediocrity, and hence, the continuation of intellectual dependence and the associated master/slave relationship in the realm of knowledge production. More importantly, however, there is a systematic attempt on the part of both politicians and scholars alike to downgrade basic research. Not only has this mental extroversion been in the service of donor countries, but it has also led to another equally important cancer, namely, a prejudice against scientific social theory. As Hountondji (1995:4) once remarked:

*“..... African scholars are often tempted especially in the social sciences, to lock themselves up into an empirical description of the most peculiar features of their societies, without any consistent effort to interpret, elaborate on, or theorise about these features. In so doing, they implicitly agree to act as informants, though learned informants, for Western science and scientists.*

In other words, while the main features of the present imperialist dominated social formations are extroverted, the same approach can be applied, by analogy, to social scientific backwardness: underdevelopment in the field of social science research can be characterised as an extroverted activity. For example, in Tanzania today, research programmes, units and facilities are not geared towards answering the needs and concerns of the labouring masses in the country. Today, academics are out in search of *consultancies* and their output and esteem are gauged in terms of the amount of money one has been able to obtain and accumulate in a year, the number of cars he/she possess, and the quality of a bungalow she/he has been able put up or is in the process of doing so! Under such circumstances, and this is my sincere opinion, as intellectuals we have no moral authority to blame our students for not reading the materials we offer them in class if we ourselves are not socially responsible to the labouring masses on the African Continent.

### **Rethinking Africa: Going beyond the culture of reading**

As already alluded to in the preceding sections, social science research activities in Africa are extroverted, just like the African economies are disarticulated economies (de Janvry, 1981; Amin, 1990), and this is principally due to the kind of relations of domination which have been established between bourgeois scholars and institutions in the imperialist countries and their counterparts located in the present underdeveloped countries in Africa. It is upon this realisation that I call upon the intellectuals left in Africa to extricate ourselves from this “knowledge dependence”, and to initiate discussions on the particular conditions necessary for independent thinking and hence, independent production of critical knowledge, which is socially relevant to the African masses. I have in mind a situation whereby a set of African universities would discuss modalities of collaboration amongst themselves. This would be the first step. For one thing, due to historical factors – one of which is knowledge dependence on the imperialist nations - it is easier for an African university to have partnerships and exchange programmes/agreements with universities in Europe or in the USA than with those on the African Continent.

The second step would be to create a Pan-African Project, which, on the basis of the existing local opportunities and constraints amongst the collaborating universities, a programme would be initiated with a view to creating a new cadre of African students who are imbued with African sensibility, passion and commitment to the African cause, but one which possess a critical mind and attitude to the “global knowledge”. The purpose

of the programme, therefore, would be to facilitate critical thinking amongst students with regard to the present role of universities whose function today is not to create knowledge which is socially relevant to the African people and its transmission, rather, the purpose is solely limited to the creation of a “labour market” where graduates are to be sold like commodities. However, the said programme would not simply confine itself to purely “teaching”, as this is a purely shallow definition of a university – note Nyerere’s conception of a University above – the traditional function of a university has been to create a cadre of critical thinkers as well as to conduct basic research. In such a programme, students should be encouraged to reconceptualise and hence, rethink the conditions as well as the problems confronting humanities in the world in general and Africa in particular.

The issue here would not simply be to reinvent the culture of reading; rather, it would entail the process of inculcating into the African youth the passion, commitment, and vision which would act as a catalyst for the liberation of the African Continent. Here, the cue is from Professor. Kofi Anyodoho who, at the 2013 edition of the Mu’azu Babangida Aliyu (MBA) Literary Colloquium, exhorted the youth to stop being admirers of foreign pleasures and privileges and other paraphernalia, instead, they need to engage themselves on how to achieve true freedom in Africa. He sounded the following warning:

*“The path to our fathers and mothers must not be erased. We must guide our youth to come to terms with their own world, to understand that if their quest for life-enriching things leads them to directions way from home, they must always remember the wisdom of the honey bee. No matter far afield the honey bee flies, no matter what fields of fragrance the honey bee discovers far away from home, the honey bee never forgets the homing call of his mother earth. Every pollen, every nectar the honey bee harvests in far away fields, comes back home to his mother Queen. Every time you taste honey’s ultimate sweetness, remember the ancestral wisdom of the honey bee.”* (Quote from *Leadership Weekend*, no. 411 of 21 December, 2013:69)

The professor cited the examples of Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Jomo Kenyatta who lived and studied in Europe, and yet returned to Africa to struggle for political independence in their respective countries. There is no one single formulae to follow to realise the suggested Pan-African Project, nevertheless, it is from the above injunction from Prof. Anyodoho that such a programme could proceed and mobilise the African

youth not only for purposes of reviving the culture of reading but also for the grand dream and vision of achieving true African independence.

### **Concluding remarks**

While it is true to state that radicalism at the Hill was a product of a consternation of both international and national forces, it may also be equally true to emphatically state that the role of the human agency was a vital factor. *Vision, passion and commitment* for the *cause of the labouring majority* were the driving forces, which energised the student militants first to read voraciously, and at the same, time to act consciously on the basis of the theoretical analysis made. The three virtues mentioned above are currently missing in the university communities in Tanzania and probably in Nigeria too. After eliminating and distorting the sense of nationalism and patriotism and more importantly the spirit of Pan-Africanism in Africa, neo-liberalism has continued to undermine the same in a subtle way by capturing the minds of the African youth by germinating and promoting amongst them *bourgeois outlook, values, norms, greed and illusions*, which in the concrete conditions prevailing in Africa are unrealistic as they are hard to realise. For example, for today's intellectuals, the quest for bourgeois values of *egoism*, individual rights and freedoms, the quest and obsession for *money and material goods* including certificates feature prominently among their minds. In the process, academic excellence is relegated to the background and hence, to talk about radicalism appears to be utopian.

All in all, as intellectuals, we need to remind ourselves of the fact that the traditional functions of universities have always been the *production and transmission* of knowledge as well as conducting *basic research*, and that *consultancy services* do lower our knowledge rather than enhance it. Today, what is required is to *re-conceptualise*, that is, to *rethink* both the social conditions responsible for the production and reproduction of human tragedy as embodied in the abysmal material conditions of the masses in the world in general and in Africa in particular as well as strategies for their elimination. We need to ask ourselves: What is the fundamental contradiction in Africa today? More specifically, what is the principal problem confronting Africa? Under the prevailing socio-economic conditions of *imperialist exploitation and domination* in Africa, what do the *labouring people* in Africa need: is it "*development*" or *national liberation*? Lastly, which relevant *revolutionary social theory* do the labouring people require so as to effect the required social transformations in Africa and in the rest of the imperialist dominated social formations?

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