At this point in history our intelligentsia has to build a form of organic African discourse that puts the African subject at the centre of existence. For a long time now Africa has been an object of outsiders’ reflections.

By Kgalema Motlanthe
Life can be understood backwards but we live it forwards. A Swahili idiom as the African continent mourns the passing on of Nelson Mandela, a titanic African political visionary, and Chinua Achebe, a socially committed African intellectual, a key question is thrown into bold relief: what is to be the role of the African intelligentsia in this post-colonial period? Similarly, the post-Mandela historical period throws up yet another pertinent if pointed question as to whether symbiotic relations are possible between African intellectuals and the African political leadership.

What imbues these questions with urgency is the current dismal socio-political landscape that characterises our continent. Franz Fanon presciently framed the challenge post-colonial Africa would face when he stated: "was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the You". Indeed, as Nicholas Creary submits, sixty years later (after independence), Africa continues to struggle to “decolonize the mind”, that is, "to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and place".2

Indeed this historical period sees Africa entangled in a web of socio-economic afflictions whose causes are deeply rooted in both subjective and objective conditions. Post-Mandela Africa is shot through with contradictions: there is a great potential for Africa to take a quantum leap into the loop of modernity through the genius of its people and the abundance of its natural resources; while simultaneously it is weighed down by congenital illnesses experienced since independence.

While these illnesses are largely the province of elected African leadership to address, Africans of all social origins: working classes, peasants, the middle classes and, critically, the intelligentsia, (intellectual leadership), have to put hands on deck in a concerted effort to re-affirm African dignity through cultural, economic and political progress. This great task has been advanced by Nelson Mandela, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, WEB DuBois, Ahmed Sékou Touré, Modibo Keita, Marcus Garvey, Camal Abdel Nasser, Julius Nyerere, OR Tambo and many other early risers of African modernity. It is my contention that now more than ever Africa needs its intelligentsia to provide intellectual leadership in shaping its future, inspired by the unifying force of Mandela’s legacy and the long gallant history of African intellectual leadership going back to the beginning of the Pan-African Movement.

A catalogue of epochal events across generations suggests that as much as the masses of ordinary people are the motif force of history, the intelligentsia has equally been a change agent in notable ways: forging nationalisms, instigating critical debates, ushering in new ways of thinking and helping lead to new social systems. This calls to mind famous historical examples such as the French Revolution (1789-1799) and the Russian Revolution (1917-23). Perhaps African intellectuals (including those in the Diaspora) have to forge closer links in the continent and across the Atlantic, the better to compare notes and present a common front at the level of human agency, so as to wrestle with these existential questions with the intention of changing our world. This position entails working for the irreversible material improvement in the lives of Africans so that Africa can shed its image of dependency as well as revisiting epistemological paradigms that lead to the ‘Us-and-Them” binary feeding the prevailing air of dehumanisation of the people of the developing world, especially Africans.

Both the socio-economic experience of Africans and their historico-cultural representation in popular imagination intersect indissolubly, given that the former draws justification, both implicitly and explicitly, from standing rationalisations and carefully calibrated theoretical platitudes in the latter. In this binary worldview Africa is off-centred as a geographic vacuity with no historical meaning as typified by the writings of Hegel3, Hume4 and other European thinkers.

It was probably with this unjust world system in mind that the French-Algerian intellectual Albert Camus penned the line that "Things as they are don’t seem to me satisfactory….The world as it is, is unbearable." Indeed most of us born outside the European moral universe find life unbearable, from cradle to grave.

On the positive side, despite serious odds, Africa has, before and throughout the era of freedom, issued forth towering intellectuals who could light the path to the future during its darkest hour. Most of these leading lights of our continent sat astride the apex of the African liberation struggle with distinction. Yet quite often the post-colonial setting has seen interminable strife between the intellectual class and the political establishment. More often than not intellectuals have not had the desired space to make their presence felt on the continued process of future building, by articulating societal aspirations through leading endogenous discourse with universally (i.e. African) shared starting points.

I am of the view that African intellectuals face two chief challenges in this stage of the historical process. The first stems from subjective conditions: i.e. helping to ensure acculturation of democratic ethos and good governance for the benefit of ordinary African masses. History has turned up cases where political leadership has let the African masses down through bad policies, mis-governance, tribalism, corruption, nepotism, coups and dictatorships. African resources continue to be a boon to outsiders. It is a serious moral indictment that while Africa makes up 12% of the world’s population, Africa accounts for only 1% of the world’s Gross Domestic Product and 2% of world trade.

Quite often the intelligentsia has also...
been on the receiving end of political suppression and harassment. To a large extent Africa still bears the ugly marks of these blights. No one but Africans themselves can fix this situation. In this regard the social segment best placed to “speak truth to power” to heighten societal consciousness against all these ills, is the intelligentsia. History would advise that the African intelligentsia should, necessarily, assume a far more meaningful role in the socio-political life of our continent, by at once engaging in a complementary but critical relationship with political leadership.

Ben Okri, the great African poet, illuminated the point when he submitted that:

“This has been the real challenge of Africa. This has been the real challenge of our times. Can we make something worthwhile of our freedom? Can we be fruitful and workable nations? Can we create a good life for our people? But more crucially, can we make sustained and important contributions to the world and help in our own way to make forward human civilisation? On the whole it can be said that African nations began with hope, fell in chaos and staggered into dependency. Or to take another variation it can be said that African nations began in unity, collapsed into multiplicity and stumbled in division. Or to weave one more jazz note of history: that African nations began in dreams, were overwhelmed by reality and stumbled about in nightmare. Or to take a classical turn, African nations came, saw and squandered.”

Ben Okri seems to be concerned, as we all are, with the ‘making something of our freedom’, by which, I gather, he means transfiguring the legacy of icons such as Mandela, Nkrumah, Neto, Sankara and the galaxy of others who fought for a free Africa, giving substance to the experience of freedom for Africans. Unfortunately, Okri seems to have concluded from past experience that ‘African nations came, saw and squandered’. A serious indictment indeed! Okri’s outspokenness against poor post-independent African leadership induces hope, though. A flame of critical self-consciousness is still flickering, if weakly. Scores of the African subject at the centre of attention. For a long time now Africa has been an object of outsiders’ reflections. Without Africa’s own internally created thought-systems linking up our past, present with the future we run the risk of capitulation to historical mendacities such as Hugh Trevor-Roper’s assertion that: ‘Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach…’ But at present there is none: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness.” Such arrogant dismissal of African historical standing has over the years helped entrench the image of Africa as a historical non-entity. In view of the present world catastrophe, I want to recall the history of Africa. I want to retell its story so far as distorted science has not concealed and lost it. I want to appeal to the past in order to explain the present... So now I ask you to turn with me back five thousand years and ask, and what is Africa and who are Negroes?”

This baton has passed down to the current crop of African intellectuals to reconstruct African history, to “restore the historical consciousness of the African people and reconquer the Promethean Consciousness”. Nothing short of direct confrontation with the claims of racism at source will clear the air of toxicities of racism, vestigial or substantive. Alik Shahabed expresses the insidious effects of racism with energetic clarity when he says: “Racism marginalises authentic African perspectives, it imposes self-serving identities onto intelligent human beings, gives them names, defines the African reality, re-assigns history outside of Africa, denies genius and agency, tells Africans what is moral and finally, squanders.”

Of course fighting / dispelling this is no mean feat. Dislodging the age-old normative narrative that immerses European historical images in hagiography while denigrating ‘the other’ will be a trans-generational project whose success is predicated on corresponding progress in both political and economic realms. A historically discernible pattern of inter-penetration has emerged between Africa’s backwaters state of development and the chronic discourse that links African woes to inherent deficiency of its people. Since the dawn of European industrialism,
European intelligentsia has continued to depict Africa’s history in ways that are of much interest to Europeans but are inconsonant with history. Until now these stereotypes about Africans have had full outlet in mass literature, mass media and lately social media. Depicted in a fashion that degrades the African character, the African intelligentsia cannot but strike back with commensurate force.

Writer Kepa Artaraz reminds us that the “definition of the term intellectual always divided those who took a view of intellectuals as simply men of ideas from those who associated the intellectual with a commitment to political and social change”.

Throughout its history of colonial domination Africa has valorised the latter conception of an intellectual to the extent that it was about social emancipation. These politically committed intellectuals were invariably sub-divided into nationalist and socialist intellectuals. Most pre-independence African intellectuals were absorbed into the new state as the nucleus of cadres to lead the new nation to the future. Those who remained outside the state often became the first to bear the brunt of the deformities of post-colonial independence. Because of their interrogating nature and free political inquiry, intellectuals in post-independent Africa faced the prospect of their interrogating nature and freedom of political marginalisation. Edward Said had this type of intellectual practice in mind when he spoke of an intellectual as person whom society recognised as having the legitimate role to ‘speak truth to power’.

It would be an understatement to say that these frozen relations between African political leadership and the intellectuals bode ill for the project of African renewal. History is awash with episodes of the transformative impact of intellectuals on their respective societies by not only subjecting pet philosophical formulas of the day to the light of rational interrogation but also, unleashing new paradigms on societies, as the case of the Philosophes during the French Revolution shows. In contrast to other parts of the world, this vital segment of African society largely bears the brunt of political persecution, marginalisation and ultimately, the inevitable prospect of exile. It is not hard to see the devitalising effects of the absence, or at best the miniscule role, of intelligentsia on Africa’s social landscape since independence.

Positively, Mandela died at a time when, embarking on a process that can only be interpreted as political modernisation, Africa has re-engineered its continental body of governance, the Organisation of African Unity, into the African Union (AU), geared to the imperatives of development in a post-colonial era unfolding within globalisation. Further to harness efforts to the task of African development, Africa has also drawn up a blueprint for economic development, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad). To its credit, the AU has tried to draw African civil society into these on-going developments to ensure that this becomes a truly African owned and driven process.

None the less, on their own, innovative political measures such as have been put in place may yet prove inadequate in moulding a unified philosophy to mobilise the African masses behind a common political vision. Because it is engaged in the enterprise of political enlightenment, the African intelligentsia, bedded in the common African experience, can lead the charge of preserving the historical heritage of our continent as well as advancing the agenda of African development in both realms of ideas and political process, without arrogating to itself the responsibility of elected political leadership, a right ascribable to electoral mandate. By elucidating the premises and surfacing the assumptions implicit in dominant thought-systems, while helping point to alternatives paths to the future, the intellectual motorises history in its own right. The existence of a vibrantly engaged intelligentsia implies a flourishing democratic culture, a sine qua non for social change.

Nelson Mandela himself entered the arena of struggle as a practicing young lawyer with a soul deeply rooted in the social, cultural, political and psychological moral universe of his people. Along with scores of other young African intellectuals of various casts of mind, he waded into debates focusing on defining and addressing the concerns of the age. He could have easily chosen the path of least resistance, relishing the life of a young black lawyer at a time when black professionals did not come penny a dozen. And yet, being moulded by the self-same social experience he would later seek to change, Mandela’s conscience remained impermeable to distractions. As young intellectuals with an evolving clarity of mind about the need for cross-fertilisation between tradition and modernity in the context of social justice, equality and democracy, their generation brought intellectual prowess to bear on interrogating received wisdom and the truths of yesterday to break new ground in forging a new vision for the future.

Mandela extolled the virtues of the engaged African intellectuals whose main task it is to question received wisdom and posit different modes of economic thinking and related matters pertaining to dominant paradigms. In this regard Mandela contended that:

The disparity between the developed and developing world, between North and South, reflects itself also in the sphere of educational and intellectual resources. When in Africa we speak and dream of, and work for, a rebirth of that continent as a full participant in the affairs of the world in the next century, we are deeply conscious of how dependent that is on the mobilisation and strengthening of the continent’s resources of learning

Mandela continued:

The current world financial crisis also
starkly reminds us that many of the concepts that guided our sense of how the world and its affairs are best ordered, have suddenly been shown to be wanting. They are seen to have hidden real structural defects in the world economic system. The precepts of the economic theorists who could so confidently prescribe to all, now appear to have been drawn much of their apparent intellectual validation from having been unchallenged by the day-to-day operations of a system that operated in the interests of the powerful. Not only does this crisis call for fundamental rethinking and reconceptualisation on the part of the theorists of the North. It more particularly and urgently emphasises the need for thinkers and intellectuals of the developing world to sharpen their skills and analyses, and for a genuine partnership between those of the North and the South in helping shape a world order that answers to the shared and common needs of all peoples. 16

Clearly Mandela is throwing down the gauntlet to our intelligentsia to execute its defining duty of exposing the bareness of some of the dominant knowledge systems that create a unipolar worldview which only serve to perpetuate the current unfair distribution of material rewards according to the centre and periphery analogy.

In addition, in emphasising the irreplaceable contribution of African intelligentsia, Mandela was drawing on historical experience. African independence at large was mostly driven by young intellectuals with a modernist outlook who questioned the philosophical basis of the colonial enterprise, including its laws, and importantly, the racist ideological underpinnings of racist structures of power that sought to downgrade Africans at social, political and psychological levels. In the cases of both Mandela’s generation in South Africa and the founding fathers of African independence generally, the intelligentsia was a constitutive agent that envisaged a whole new world founded on the tenets of justice.

In this regard the intellectual current that emerged in the form of the Pan-African Movement in the last century provides useful historical referents. Molefi Kete Asante notes that the term ‘Pan-Africanism’ has come to mean the unity of Africa and the elimination of white racial domination from the continent of Africa. It was this movement that generated the political discussion around African unity for most of the twentieth century. If fact, the Pan-African Congresses of the Twentieth century were begun in the African Diaspora, thereby moulding the discourse on Pan-Africanism in the context of world Africanity. All discussions of African unity must hark back to the days when Africans in the Caribbean and the Americas called for solidarity between all African people.

The intellectual tenets of African nationalism are traceable to these historical origins. The Pan-African Movement served as a mobilising vision, attracting many key intellectuals of African descent on and outside the African continent. The African intelligentsia today can look to the Pan-African Movement for inspiration in seeking answers to current African challenges, at least from the viewpoint of objective conditions. Key concerns that engaged the thinking of the Pan-African Movement may have been largely sorted by now, but there are historical implications which current African intellectuals must address.

The Concept of African unity, which culminated in developments such as the formation of the Organisation of African Union, was first sparked into life during the intellectual ferment within the Pan-African Movement. Considering that the African Union is the conceptual elevation of the OAU after the yet to be completed decolonisation process, there appears to be a certain historical seamlessness that binds various historical periods in Africa together in a manner that gives our history a coherent interpretation.

If there is any one outstanding lesson the whole African world has to learn from Mandela’s passing on, it is that for change to happen we have to become the subject, taking charge of our own destiny. Located in this forte, the African intelligentsia is in a position where history has thrust upon it immense responsibilities to lead the way. Equally responsible is the African political leadership, which, because it is legitimised by popular mandate, must necessarily involve the multitude of African peasants and working class at all levels of mobilisation and decision-making in this teleological journey. Short of a shared nourishing social space shared by both political and intellectual leadership in this historic task of creating a natural human landscape congenial to restoring the collective African personality, no success is possible in this huge project. The objective conditions dictate that the political leadership create ideal conditions for the intellectual class to define key issues of the day, so that, steeped in this affirming consciousness, ordinary Africans can help bring about a better African, of which Nelson Mandela, his generation and the one before him can be proud!

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