

H-Net Reviews

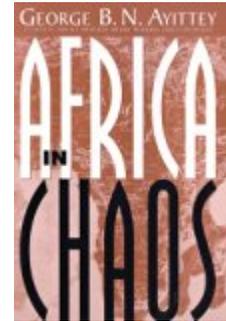
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



George B.N. Ayittey. *Africa in Chaos*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. xvi + 399 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-21787-7; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-16400-3.

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Lecture or Sermon?

Ayittey has given us a bitter *cri de coeur* which will convince the convinced and leave the unconvinced in a state of ambivalence and skepticism. He begins by noting that despite its resources and potential wealth, Africa “is inexorably mired in steaming squalor, misery, deprivation, and chaos” (p. 6). No observer of the African scene would deny that many African states suffer from this cluster of dysfunctions. But this journalistic account, from a renown academic, is both lecture and sermon, both of which are seemingly devoid of either hope or redemption. Noting the complexities of the African scene, the author asks the reader’s indulgence for engaging in generalizations expressed in non-technical language; the final effect appears to be a series of critical conclusions based on uncritical use of selected evidence.

The thrust of Ayittey’s argument is straightforward. He notes that Africa’s difficulties can be blamed on either external sources such as colonialism or on internal ones arising out of corrupt leaders who have behaved selfishly, ignored indigenous modes of governance, and imitated Western type political systems which are inappropriate modes of governance for Africa.

Departing from the usual practice of blaming external forces, Ayittey adopts the “internalist” cause of African failures. This is not an easy or popular choice. He begins by criticizing the Africans who coped with colonial rule either by identifying with it or by imitating it, or who conformed with its requirements. He expresses disappointment and contempt for the post-independence lead-

ers who imitated European life styles even in matters of the kinds of food they ate and houses they lived in, as well as the socio-economic policies they adopted—such as dependence on the State as a major source of services—and retention of westernized modes of education. In the author’s view, the more appropriate alternative governmental institutions and policies were the pre-colonial indigenous methods of governance which also required accountability and other democratic procedures but in a manner consistent with traditional culture.

His reactions are quite understandable courageous expressions of opinion. But it is reasonable to ask, how effective would the alternative methods have been under the circumstances? How relevant would they have been to modern day Africa? Could leaders have adapted Julius Nyerere’s old adage “the elders sit on a log and talk until they agree” to the changing and imperative needs of new African states? Were all the indigenous traditional systems as effective and accountable as Ayittey suggests?

The author points to the extensive corruption among leaders, mismanagement of economic resources, human rights abuses, excesses of personal rule, all of which are clusters of harmful forms of political behavior, all of which interact negatively against the wellbeing of Africans. He uses the most extreme cases to illustrate these charges—Somalia, Burundi-Rwanda, Liberia, Zaire. Specific cases are offered as general patterns of behavior. He notes that basic ingredients such as security, freedom, incentives, and functioning infrastructure are miss-

ing, and that the consequences will be collapse and chaos. He cites various reform efforts but despairs of their efficacy. He characterizes aid from Western donors as inadequate, misplaced, and ill-used. He suggests solutions such as promoting civil society, “modernizing the indigenous” (p. 311), and even instituting a buy-out option to encourage departure of African despots.

Turning to the intellectuals, whom he claims are “Africa’s best hope” (p. 348), Ayittey then goes on to criticize most of them for cooperating with the government. He labels them as “prostitutes” but offers little if any substantive proof. He does not acknowledge that intellectuals in African universities are so poorly paid that they have to “moonlight” to earn a decent living; that universities are so poorly financed that even the library collections are inadequate; that students are short-changed in their education. Yet in the face of these circumstances there are numerous faculty who endure deprivations in order to teach. They have their flaws, but prostitution is not among them. Ayittey does not even acknowledge their existence.

Ayittey’s pessimism is understandable, and he joins a chorus of equally unhappy Africans who express their criticisms with a concerned courage. But, this also takes a pessimistic form which destroys or discourages efforts to overcome problems. And it neglects other kinds of evidence which suggests the picture is not entirely bleak. See, for example, David F. Gordon and Howard Wolpe (“The Other Africa: An End to Afro-pessimism,” *World Policy Journal*, Spring 1998, v. 15, n. 1) who point out that South Africa, Mozambique, Ethiopia and Namibia are en-

gaged in reconciliation and nation building, that during 1996/97 there were multiparty elections in twenty-six African states, that the aggregate growth rates during 1995/96, doubled over the decade, that infant mortality rates had declined, that Ghana had moved toward responsible government and free/fair elections.

Other methods of “accountability” are emerging and taking root, such as the Uganda Parliament’s watchdog method of censuring Cabinet members for corrupt practices, or grass roots efforts such as the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya which has diligently acted to preserve the environment in the face of hostile government policies, or the various women’s NGOs elsewhere seeking reform of legislation relating to land ownership and domestic relations. The moral of the story, however, is that readers must find their way between the two positions. Whether it is easier and more comfortable to be hopeful or more satisfying simply to be negative is another story. But, Ayittey’s dependence on journalistic accounts, the minimal use of Africanist studies published in the 1990s, and his failure to note the emergence of a new generation of leaders in the civil society results in either an Afro-pessimist lecture to an unidentified audience, or a warning sermon lacking a redemptive message. Nevertheless, it is an important message which requires careful attention. Is anyone listening?

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