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Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora Since 1787. Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. 203 pp.

This book has an ambitious agenda in covering over two hundred years of Pan-African history via political figures from Africa and the African Diaspora. Studies relating to African cultural resistance continue to hold attention in the academy and with good reason. Certainly the dynamic and interdisciplinary aspect of African Diaspora research presents unparalleled opportunity for those researchers interested in both the continuities and discontinuities concerning the history of African descended peoples throughout the world, but particularly within the “Atlantic world.”

Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, both scholars based in Britain, offer a book that can summarily be described as a collection of short biographical accounts on some of the key Pan-Africanists to emerge from 1787 to the middle of the twentieth century. It is a useful reference book that gives basic insight into the lives of forty personalities who they claim as part of Pan-African history. I use the phrase “who they claim” purposefully as many scholars would probably not, for example, depict Martin Luther King, Jr. as part of Pan-African history. Most often it is black nationalists such as Malcolm X, who is covered in the book, that have been viewed as typical of a “Pan-Africanist” political figure. Nevertheless, when one reads the pages covering King and his links with the African continent it makes sense that he should be included.

The authors argue rightly that there has never been a universally-accepted definition of what Pan-Africanism stands for and entails. They go on to define it as such: “Our definition includes women and men of African descent whose lives and work have been concerned, in some way, with the social and political emancipation of African peoples and those of the African diaspora.” (vii) In terms of women being included in their definition, it is curious that they only offer us three from the forty personalities: Constance Cummings-John, Amy Ashwood Garvey, and Claudia Jones. Why they did not consider a biography of Anna Julia Cooper, a pioneer for African-American women's rights who attended the first Pan-African conference in London in 1900 (her presence at the meeting is noted on page 192, by way of Henry Sylvester Williams); or Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the great crusader against lynching and for women's rights; and Mary Church Terrell, another pioneering woman in African American history, to name only a few, is quite baffling.

Indeed, another salient omission is that of Amy Jacques Garvey, Marcus Garvey's second wife, and arguably the most influential Pan-African woman of her generation, is equally bewildering, especially as the authors present a biography of Amy Ashwood Garvey, his first wife. Amy Jacques Garvey, inter alia, was responsible for editing and publishing her husband's major speeches and writings, along with keeping the Garvey movement alive after his death in 1940. This is a major oversight in the analysis of historical Pan-African personalities. To their credit, the authors do point out the lack of research into the role of women in Pan-African history. (x)

Regardless of the notable exclusions, the book can be considered unique, and at least the authors have created a first biographical reference volume that highlights the linkages and commonalities of these diverse Pan-Africanists. Certainly this is a refreshing and much-needed theme that counters academia's endemic "fragmentation theses" offered through usually turgid postmodernist analyses on Africa and particularly the African Diaspora. In point of fact it is a hopeful sign that forthcoming scholarship will continue to find commonality in the historical and contemporary struggles of African descended population groups. Moreover, it is noted that each biographical sketch is presented in a rather sober style, and they do not make the error of glorifying Pan-African history.

All of the personalities covered were undeniably influenced in some way by their social interaction with the West, particularly in terms of those born in Africa such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere. Nkrumah, for instance, was educated in the US and spent time in London forming his ideas about African liberation, and his influences included two giants of Pan-African history: Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois. Julius Nyerere studied at Edinburgh University in Scotland before he was to become the creator of Tanzania, and a founder member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

In terms of the regional parameters of the African Diaspora, the authors state that the focus of the book is primarily on Anglophile and Francophile Africans, along with their Caribbean counterparts. Therefore some names contained in this volume will be very familiar, others not so familiar. Frantz Fanon, George Padmore, Walter Rodney, C.L.R. James, Nelson Mandela, and Paul Robeson are among the familiar Pan-Africans. Nathaniel Akinremi Fadipe, Dusé Mohamed Ali, Ras T. Makonnen, Ahmed Ben Bella, and W. Alphaeus Hunton can be deemed among the lesser-known group. Finally, at the end of each account references are provided for further reading.

Overall, in producing a timely introduction to Pan-African political figures, this book will serve a useful purpose in the field. It can best be considered as a starting point that is likely to be expanded upon by future scholars. Adi and Sherwood shed light on some of the major Pan-African personalities, and some of the obscure players. This should help the student of African studies explore the historical evolution of Pan-Africanism. Though the lives of forty personalities, stretching over two hundred years, cannot be expected to provide us with the breadth of Pan-African thought and experience, the reader should come away with new ways to combine and define the African continent and its Diaspora as it relates to the struggle of the European enslavement, colonial, and postcolonial eras.

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