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‘The Pan-African Pantheon’

Koffi M Kouakou offers the review of professor Adekeye Adebajo’s ‘The Pan-African Pantheon: Prophets, Poets and Philosophers’—with insight from the editor himself

In this special Africa Edition, we make you a special offer—a book review. We could not resist sharing with you this recently published book about the idea and ideals of Pan-Africanism and the legendary men and women of African descent around the world who fought for a free and liberated Africa. It deals mainly with the lives, struggles, and hard-fought victories of the forerunners, prophets, poets, philosophers, and activists who designed and propagated the ideals of Pan-Africanism from its very beginning in the late 19th century to our modern day.

It is not easy to do justice to such a vast topic discussed in an academic style. The notion of a Pan-African pantheon also put on a pedestal many of the people presented in the book. Thus it creates an image of higher-ups and put them in a special elite class of their own, while excluding many other forgotten ones who fought for the freedom of Africa.

However, the idea of a Pan-African pantheon should not put us off from the incredible role these men and women played in liberating Africa. As such, the editor and the contributing authors do great justice to their works and a marvelous job at laying out the insightful life-markers of the prophets, poets, and philosophers of the pantheon of Pan-Africanism from its genesis, its challenges in turbulent times, slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, and the so-called independence days to the

more recent struggle against Apartheid in South Africa.

The book offers in-depth analyses of Pan-Africanism challenges and raises several essential questions such as the actual state of affairs of Pan-Africanism, its future, and the role of the African youth. However, this book has some gaps. Its central concern has missed a few key hard-core Pan-Africanists such as professors Cheikh Antah Diop and Theophile Obenga, the high caliber intellectuals, academics, anthropologists, and social-scientist trailblazers who exhibited great courage to face a denialist Western world on the contribution of Africans to the world.

This book will be a classic for Pan-Africanism thoughts. We all should have it, read it, learn from it, and use its powerful African liberation and Diaspora lessons.

In order to get even more detail about the publication, professor Adekeye Adebajo, the editor of the book, tells us more.

The Pan-African Pantheon: Prophets, Poets and Philosophers

Pan-Africanism can be defined as the efforts to promote the political, socio-economic, and cultural unity of Africa and its diaspora. I recently edited a 38-chapter volume of ‘The Pan-African Pantheon: Prophets, Poets and Philosophers’ (Jacana, 2020). With chapters by 37 African, Afro-Caribbean, and African-American scholars on 36 major Pan-African figures, the book seeks to contribute to curriculum transformation efforts globally.

Pan-Africanism was historically a reaction by Africans in the diaspora to the twin European plagues of slavery and colonialism. The 400-year transatlantic slave trade caused 12-million to 15-million Africans to be forcibly transported to the Caribbean and Americas. This was followed by eight decades of colonial rule in Africa. Fifteen years after the notorious Berlin Conference of 1884/1885 at which the rules were set by European imperialists for the partition of Africa, the Pan-African movement was born when Trinidadian lawyer Henry Sylvester-Williams convened the First Pan-African Conference in London in 1900.

Between 1919 and 1945, five Pan-African Congresses took place in Europe and America, dominated by towering diaspora intellectuals WEB du Bois and George Padmore. By the time of the fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945, the movement had shifted its centre of influence from the diaspora to Africa, but lost its civil society dynamism and close links to the diaspora.

St Thomas’s Edward Blyden has often been referred to as the “Father of Pan-Africanism”. He championed the concept of Ethiopianism, urging African Americans to return to Africa to help develop the continent.

This inspired Marcus Garvey’s Back to Africa movement. Blyden’s 1887 classic, ‘Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race’ was adopted by Kenya’s Ali Mazrui in his profoundly influential 1986 nine-part documentary, ‘The Africans: A Triple

Heritage'. The "African Renaissance" was championed by South Africa's Pixley Seme before becoming centrally associated with compatriot Thabo Mbeki.

The role of female activists has often been overlooked in the Pan-African canon. This book thus focuses on such female activists as Jamaica's Amy Ashwood

Garvey, SA's Miriam Makeba and Ruth First, Kenya's Wangari Maathai and Micere Mugo, Senegal's Mariama Bâ, Nigeria's Buchi Emecheta, and America's Maya Angelou. Angelou worked closely with Malcolm X to mobilise African leadership in support of the civil rights struggle in apartheid America. Two decades later,

African-American civil rights lawyer Randall Robinson used the TransAfrica Forum to wage the anti-apartheid struggle in the US.

Trinidad's CLR James was a pioneering voice in postcolonial studies, while Jamaican-British sociologist Stuart Hall incorporated issues of race, gender, and hegemony into cultural studies.

Africa and its diaspora also produced noteworthy philosophers. Steve Biko's innovative black consciousness sought to build the cultural self-esteem of his black compatriots. Martinique's Frantz Fanon preached democracy, development, and revolutionary change across Africa.

Inspired by Fanon, Bissau Guinean revolutionary Amilcar Cabral formulated critical theories of revolutionary decolonisation and revolutionary re-Africanisation. Beninois scholar-politician Paulin Hountondji advocated a self-dependent African epistemology; Congolese intellectual VY Mudimbe deconstructed the Western "invention" of Africa; while Ghanaian-British philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah critiqued what he saw as the essentialism of Pan-Africanism in favour of a more universalist cosmopolitanism.

Cultural Pan-Africanism represented the reaction by the African diaspora to the indignities blacks had suffered over centuries. Martinique's Aimé Césaire and Senegal's Léopold Senghor developed the idea of *nigritude*, which poetically glorified black culture, looking back nostalgically at a rich African past.

The realm of music celebrated the radical reggae rhythms of Jamaica's Bob Marley, the rebellious Afro-jazz of Nigeria's Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, and Makeba's anti-apartheid melodies.

From Addis Ababa to Abuja through Atlanta and Antigua, Africa and its diaspora now need to build an effective civil society-led movement to avoid the wrath of Africa's ancestors. ▲

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