Reconsiderations

Pan-Africanist history: a South African Perspective

Review Article

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The Pan-African Pantheon: Prophets, Poets, and Philosophers; edited by Adekeye Adebajo (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2020), xx + 655pp. ISBN 9781431430222.

Routledge Handbook of Pan-Africanism; edited by Reiland Rabaka (London: Routledge, 2020), 568pp. ISBN 9780429020193.

The publication of these two major books in 2020 suggests that, though Pan-Africanism has been pronounced "dead" by one of the contributors,[1] its history remains an important subject of study. Adekeye Adebajo, who is now the Director of the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation at the University of Johannesburg, had the good idea of bringing together a collection of essays on leading figures associated with Pan-Africanism over time. This is not the first such collection,[2] but is the most substantial and important. A large book, attractively produced by Jacana, it contains thirty-six well-written, ten to fifteen-page biographies of leading people from across Africa and the diaspora, from the nineteenth century to the present. As the word "Pantheon" implies, this is a collection of essays on a group of people

[1]Hilary Beckles, "The Great Durban Betrayal" in *The Pan-African Pantheon*, 58-69.

[2]Note Robert A Hill (editor), *Pan-African Biography* (Los Angeles: African Studies Center, UCLA,1987) and Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, *Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787*. (New York: Routledge, 2003) [online resource] https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files/hakim_adi_pan-african_history_political_figuresbook4you.org_.pdf. Of its forty biographies, the only South African one is on Mandela.

who are respected, in this case for being architects or promoters, in different ways and in different contexts, of Pan-Africanism. Alongside this volume, Reiland Rabaka, a Professor of African, African American, and Caribbean Studies in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and a Research Fellow in the College of Human Sciences at the University of South Africa, has edited a Handbook for Routledge that aims to provide, in its words, "an international, intersectional, and interdisciplinary overview of, and approach to, Pan-Africanism."[3]

Its thirty-six thematic chapters cover the intellectual origins, historical evolution, and radical politics of Pan-Africanism, theories of Pan-Africanism, literary and musical Pan-Africanism, and the relevance of Pan-Africanism in the twenty-first century.

What is Pan-Africanism? In the last chapter of the Routledge volume Guy Martin writes that "Pan-Africanism is an ideal and a movement aiming at uniting African people with people from the African diaspora—particularly from the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe—against cultural marginalisation, political domination/oppression, and economic exploitation" (Rabaka, 527). In his fifty-page introductory chapter in *The Pan-African Pantheon* Adebajo describes Pan-Africanism as "efforts to promote the political, socio-economic and cultural unity, emancipation and self-reliance of Africa and its diaspora" (Adebajo, 4). Such definitions may suggest that the link between the continent and the diaspora, created by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, is central to Pan-Africanism, but from at least the 1950s Pan-Africanism has as often been seen in terms of African continental unity. The two need not, of course, be contradictory: the African Union, the foremost institution of continental union now existing, has made some efforts to link Africa and the African diaspora. But there remains much ambiguity about what should be included as "Pan-African": to say, for example, as Martin does, that "Culturally, Pan-Africanism aims at reclaiming Africa's heritage, history, culture, traditions and values" (Rabaka, 527) is not helpful in defining what is specific to Pan-Africanism. Adebajo stresses the emancipatory goals of Pan-Africanism, especially its concern to liberate Africa from colonial rule, but chooses not to get bogged down in definitions and admits that

[3] *Routledge Handbook of Pan-Africanism* [online resource] https://www.routledge.com/Routledge-Handbook-of-Pan-Africanism/Rabaka/p/book/9780367030667 (accessed 19 March 2021).

his volume does not "attempt to develop any theory or philosophy of Pan-Africanism", which he merely calls "a broad church of many faiths" (Adebajo, 6).

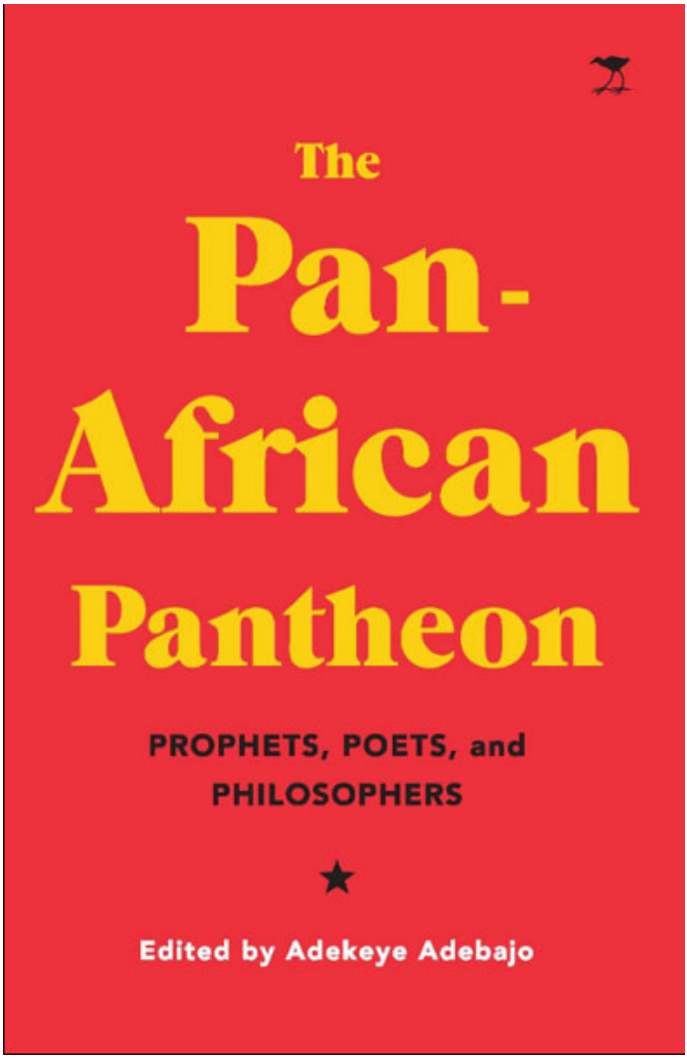

Fig. 7-1. Cover: *The Pan-African Pantheon: Prophets, Poets, and Philosophers*; edited by Adekeye Adebajo (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2020)

It is this vague definition that allows Adebajo to include in *The Pan-African Pantheon*, alongside essays on individuals who clearly promoted either links between Africa and the diaspora or continental unity, others on people whose thought or practice only focused marginally on either. This can be illustrated from the South Africans who are included (and are discussed below), as well as, say, from the chapter on Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the United Nations Secretary-General, who Adebajo dubs a "pompous Pharaoh" (Adebajo, 206). At the same time, one can think of many others who might have been included, had space allowed, such as Joseph Booth, the originator of the slogan "Africa for the Africans";[4] Aimé Césaire, one of the founders of the negritude movement; Martin Luther King, who is only brought into the volume in the chapter on Malcolm X; Julius Nyerere of Tanzania; Senegal's Cheikh Anta Diop and Sekou Toure of Guinea. Also missing from this volume are Patrice Lumumba, whose tragic assassination, along with that of Amilcar Cabral and others, reminds us how right-wing forces worked against Pan-Africanism in the early years of decolonisation. An even more striking lacuna is the man who, after Nkrumah, was, in the words of Martin, "the main advocate of Radical Pan-Africanism and of African continental unity in Africa" (Rabaka, 529), Muammar Qaddafi and more. Adebajo merely mentions that he did more than anyone to create the African Union out of the Organisation of African Unity (Adebajo, 35), before he was killed in the aftermath of the NATO attack on his country in 2011.

Those with an interest in Pan-Africanism in relation to South Africa will find in *The Pan-African Pantheon* five relatively well-informed essays on South African figures, though how Pan-African they were is not always made clear.[5] Bongani Ngqulungu of the University of Johannesburg's Institute for Advanced Study draws from his book on the founder of the African National Congress for his sketch on Pixley Seme. There is little doubt that Seme's

[4]Harry W Langworthy, *Africa for the Africans: The Life of Joseph Booth*. (Blantyre: Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 1996).

[5]I write "relatively well-informed" because they omit some key sources: one example is the essay on Ruth First, which does not mention Alan Wieder's *Ruth First and Joe Slovo and the War Against Apartheid* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2013). Other essays also omit references to key sources: for example, the excellent essay on George Padmore by Seamus Duggan does not cite Hakim Adi's key work on *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the. Diaspora, 1919–1939* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013).

inspirational "Regeneration of Africa" speech at Columbia University and his call for unity among black Africans in South Africa qualifies him as a Pan-Africanist, but does Ruth First's academic writing and activism justify the journalist Maureen Isaacson calling her a "Pan-African Revolutionary"?

While Thabo Mbeki did more than any other South African to drive continental projects, as Adebayo shows, based on his biography of Mandela's successor, the chapter on Steve Biko, written by his friend and colleague Barney Pityana, does not grapple in any depth with the relationship of Black Consciousness and Pan-Africanism. Ian Macqueen shows in his chapter in the *Routledge Handbook* that that relationship is far from clear. Nor does the chapter in the Adebajo volume on Miriam Makeba by Nomsa Mwamuka show to what extent she can be called, as the title of the chapter does, "Mama Africa".

Other chapters in *The Pan-African Pantheon* are also to some extent concerned with South Africa. The distinguished West Indian historian Hilary Beckles has penned a surprisingly polemical chapter on what he calls the "Great Durban Betrayal" that occurred in 2001 when, in his view, at a United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in South Africa, Pan Africanism as linking the continent and the diaspora was "betrayed" by those who championed the African Renaissance.[6] The chapter in *The Pan-African Pantheon* on Kwame Nkrumah, which spends time asking to what extent he was a "Great Ghanaian," is thin on his support for Southern African liberation.[7] That support is the theme picked up in the only chapter in the Routledge volume that focuses on Southern Africa, by Tavengwa Gwekwerere of the Department of Pan-African Studies at the Cal State University, Los Angeles, who in my view over-stresses the alliances forged between liberation movements in the struggle decades.[8]

[6]Beckles reveals ignorance of southern Africa. He writes, for example, that Fidel Castro sent Cubans to Mozambique to help liberate South Africa (Adebajo, 63).

[7]Matteo Grilli, *Nkrumaism and African Nationalism: Ghana's Pan-African Foreign Policy in the Age of Decolonization* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

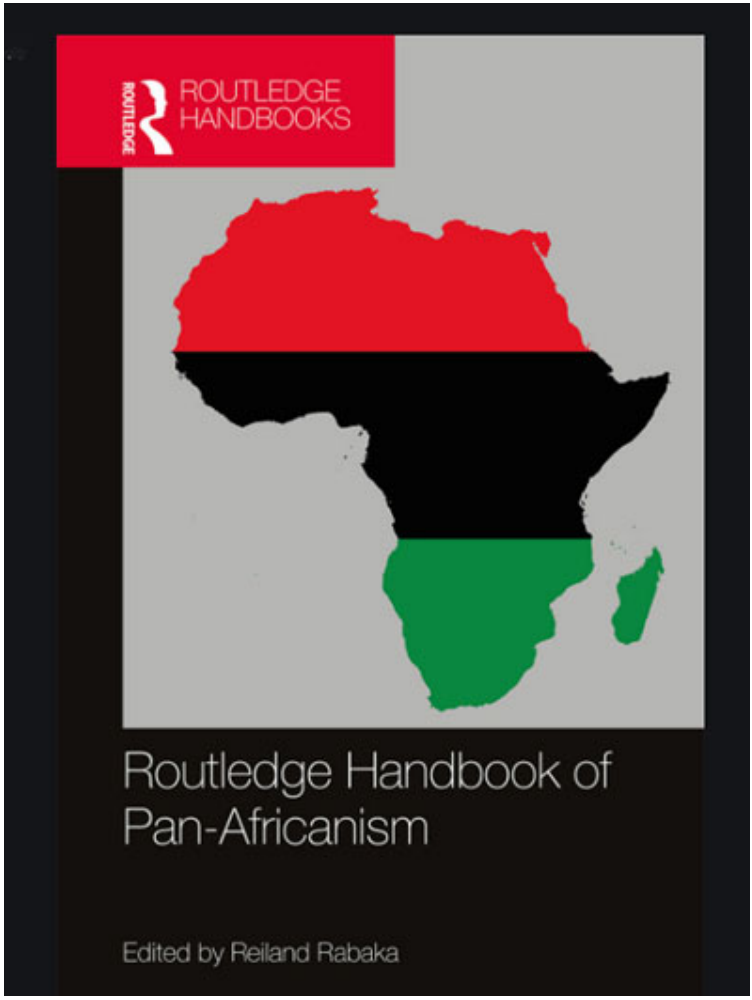

Fig. 7-2. Cover: *Routledge Handbook of Pan-Africanism*; edited by Reiland Rabaka (London: Routledge, 2020)

[8]Tavengwa Gwekwerere, "Pan-Africanism and the Anti-Colonial Movement in Southern Africa, 1950s–1990s" in *Routledge Handbook*, 324ff. His Department lists among "Prominent individuals with degrees in Pan African, Africana, African, or African American Studies" Thabo Mbeki and William Kentridge: Cal State University https://www.calstatela.edu/academic/pas/dwhy.php.

Together, these southern African related chapters do not take us very far in tracing or understanding the history of Pan-Africanism in relation to South Africa and the southern African region. A history of Pan-Africanism in South Africa would of course have to acknowledge that slavery and the Atlantic slave-trade was not the bond between black Africans in South Africa and the diaspora in the Western hemisphere that it was for Africans elsewhere on the continent.

From at least the 1870s, however, the early western-educated black elite in the Eastern Cape showed an interest in black Americans because of the similar racial oppression in both South Africa and the United States. Pan-Africanism as a movement did not begin until the end of the nineteenth century, in the diaspora, but its main founder, the Trinidadian Henry Sylvester Williams, was quick to move to settle in South Africa after he had organised the first Pan-African Congress in London in 1900.[9]

That early Pan-Africanism was non-racial in outlook is shown by the fact that one of those who took a leading role after the 1900 Congress was Frank Colenso, a son of the Bishop of Natal.[10] The early pioneers of Pan-Africanism who based themselves at the Cape, who included the editor of *The South African Spectator*, Francis Zacchaeus Peregrino, achieved little, however, in the face of South African racism.[11]

[9]James Hooker, *Henry Sylvester Williams: Imperial Pan-Africanist* (London: Rex Collings, 1975); Owen Mathurin, *Henry Sylvester Williams and the Origins of the Pan-African Movement 1869-1911* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976); Chris Saunders, "From Trinidad to Cape Town: The First Black Lawyer at the Cape" *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library* 55, 4 (2001): 141–161; Marika Sherwood *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora.* (London: Routledge, 2011). For a preliminary attempt to trace Pan-Africanism over time in a South African city see Chris Saunders, "Pan-Africanism: The Cape Town Case" *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47, 3 (2012): 291-230.

[10]Gwilym Colenso and Christopher Saunders, "New Light on the Pan-African Association" part II, *African Research & Documentation* 107 (2008), 27-45.

[11]Christopher Saunders, "F Z S Peregrino and the *South African Spectator*". *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library* 35 (March 1978): 81-90; Christopher Saunders, "Peregrino, Francis Zacchaeus Santiago (c.1851–1919)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)[online resource] http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/94965.

Fig. 7-3. Example of Peregrino's *The South African Spectator* (23.01.1902)

Though the South African Native National Congress was to some extent a pan-South African body with regional links which changed its name to African National Congress in 1923, there is little evidence that the early ANC thought in terms of continental union or took action to develop links with the diaspora.[12] In the 1920s it was the Garvey movement that led the way in promoting Pan-Africanism in South Africa.

As Robert Trent Vinson has shown,[13] for all its emphasis on blackness, some of the South African branches of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association had coloured as well as black African members. Again, little of permanence was achieved and the Africanism in the ANC Youth League from the 1940s did not connect directly with the Pan-Africanist visions then being articulated elsewhere. When the 1945 Pan African Congress, held in Manchester, England, demanded "autonomy and independence for Black Africa," it was not clear what that meant for the white-ruled countries of southern Africa.[14]

It was in the 1950s that the wider visions of Pan-Africanism began to find resonance in South Africa. They did so both in those who under the leadership of Robert Sobukwe went on to found the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) in Soweto in 1959 and to some extent also at grass-roots level.[15] Patrick Duncan, called by his biographer a Pan-African, having left the non-racial Liberal Party, briefly became a leading figure in the PAC in the early 1960s, which continued to attract coloured, if not white members.[16] Another white South Africa liberal, the journalist Colin Legum, then in

[12]Cf. Peter Limb, *The ANC's Early Years* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010).

[13]Robert Trent Vinson, *The Americans Are Coming!: Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2012). See the review by Chris Saunders in *Safundi. The Journal of South African and American Studies* 14, 1 (2013): 121-133;

[14]See the 75th anniversary discussions at *PAC@75: Pan African Congress 75th Anniversary Celebrations* (held at Manchester Metropolitan University, 15-18 October 2020) [online resource] https://www.mmu.ac.uk/pac75.

[15]Adebajo writes that Pan-Africanism only "returned home" [to Africa] in the 1960s (Adebajo, 7)). Cf. Benjamin Pogrund, *How Can Man Die Better: The Life of Robert Sobukwe* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2006); Lauren Marx, "The Relevance of Robert Sobukwe's Pan-Africanism in Contemporary South Africa" *Theoria* (Pietermaritzburg), 64, 153 (2017): 28-143.

[16]Charles Jonathan Driver, *Patrick Duncan. South African and Pan-African* (London: Heinemann, 1980).

exile, wrote one of the first general works on Pan-Africanism.[17] Only very recently has the full extent of, say, Nkrumah's support for Southern African liberation movements been documented.[18]

In his argumentative chapter in the Routledge volume, Gwekwerere maintains that the 1950s-1990s period was a "golden age" of continental Pan-Africanism, primarily because of the assistance other African countries gave to the liberation movements conducting armed struggles in Southern Africa but also because of the way in which the liberation movements worked together. To suggest that this has been "written out of history" is hardly correct. Recent work has revealed in some detail how the OAU Liberation Committee, Tanzania, the Congo in the early 1960s,[19] and, from the mid-1970s, the Frontline states all gave crucial assistance to the Southern African liberation movements. It may well be that without them liberation would not have been achieved, despite the assistance received from outside Africa, and despite, of course, the internal struggle. Showing that liberation movements could on occasion work together is hardly evidence of Pan-Africanism. Gwekwerere points to the ANC-ZAPU alliance in the late 1960s, which, as Hugh Macmillan has shown, continued in the late 1970s, and to Frelimo's assistance to ZANU despite the two movements having different backers, but he ignores the other side of the coin: the divisions between the movements and their repeated failure to act together.

While the PAC disintegrated in exile, and never recovered after the end of apartheid, the ANC was influenced by Pan-Africanism in its exile decades. Mandela attended a Pan-African Freedom Movement meeting in Addis Ababa in 1962 before being arrested on his return to South Africa.[20] When a full history of Pan-Africanism in South Africa is written, it will need to

[17]Colin Legum, *Pan-Africanism; A Short Political Guide* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1962).

[18]See especially Grilli, *Nkrumaism and African Nationalism*.

[19]On this see especially Lazlo Passemiers, *Decolonisation and Regional Geopolitics: South Africa and the "Congo Crisis," 1960-1965* (London: Routledge, 2019). Researched from a South African base, this book does much to cast new light on the assistance given the South African liberation movements, the PAC prime among them, by the Congo in the early 1960s.

[20]Matteo Grilli and Frank Gerits (editors), *Visions of African Unity: New Perspectives on the History of Pan-Africanism and African Unification Projects* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

explore links between this earlier history and the foreign policy of the freed Mandela and then Mbeki and their successors in the post-apartheid decades.[21] Such a history would surely conclude that South Africa has a very mixed Pan-African record in recent decades: on the one hand it is home to the Pan African Parliament, on the other, especially from 2008, it has been the scene of many violent incidents of what has often been called xenophobia but is more accurately Afrophobia, because only those from other African countries have been targeted.

While a few chapters in *The Pan-African Pantheon* illustrate cultural aspects of Pan-Africanism—the singing and related activities of Miriam Makeba, Bob Marley and Fela Amkulapo-Kuti—the book is mainly concerned with intellectuals and members of ruling elites or aspirant members of the elite. The African Union sees the diaspora as its sixth sub-region, but that means virtually nothing in practice.

Concluding his introductory essay, Adebajo calls for a new Pan-Africanism that will be more "people-driven" (Adebajo, 35, 57), but how Pan Africanism can become more embedded in the popular imagination of both those living in Africa and members of the African diaspora is not explored. One can certainly envisage that future work on Pan-Africanism will focus far more than these two volumes do on lesser-known figures.

These might include, say, Alpheus Hunton, whose importance in the anti-apartheid struggle in the United States has only recently begun to be recognised,[22]or, say, F Z S Peregrino, whose ancestry brings in Latin America, entirely ignored in these volumes, for his family came from Brazil. His own history linked the United States and South Africa and, though he has now been revealed to have been a man of dubious integrity, the pages of his *South*

[21]Eddy Maloka, *When Foreign Becomes Domestic: The Interplay of National Interests, Pan-Africanism and internationalism in South Africa's Foreign Policy* ([Johannesburg Metropolitan Area]: Ssali Publishing House, 2019). Cf. for example Chris Landsberg, "Afro-Continentalism: Pan-Africanism in Post-Settlement South Africa's Foreign Policy" *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 2012, 47 (4), 436-448.

[22]Along with Paul Robeson, Hunton was a key figure in the Council on African Affairs, which aided the ANC from the late 1940s, and he edited its journal before eventually moving to Zambia, where he continued his anti-apartheid work. See, for example, William Minter, Gail Hovey and Charles Cobb, *No Easy Victories: African Liberation and American Activists Over a Half Century, 1950-2000* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008).

African Spectator show him to have been a committed Pan-African.[23] In his life are revealed the complexities of the Pan-African story more generally, one of noble aspirations and very imperfect practice.

There is clearly much more work to be done to illustrate these complexities, and how visions and practices of Pan-Africanism changed over time in relation to South Africa. Successor volumes to these two may, one hopes, help to do this. In the meantime, whether or not *The Pan-African Pantheon* will, in the words of its editor, "make a significant contribution to contemporary global transformation debates" (ix), no-one interested in the history of Pan Africanism can afford to ignore these two volumes, though the one, as befits such a handbook, will likely only be consulted by those with access to university libraries, while the *Pantheon* should attract a wide readership.

[23]David Killingray and Martin Plaut, "F Z S Peregrino: A Significant but Duplicitous Figure in the Black Atlantic World" *South African Historical Journal* 68, 4 (2016): 493-516.