

Kwesi Kwaa Prah. Beyond The Color Line: Pan-Africanist Disputations

Selected Sketches, Letters, Papers And Reviews. Africa World Press, Inc., 1998, 188pp

Kwesi Prah's book entitled *Beyond the Color Line: Pan-Africanist Disputations: Selected Sketches, Letters, Papers and Reviews*, accurately captures the contents of the book, which is largely a compendium of his Pan-Africanist philosophy and how it has shaped his life and scholarship over time. To begin, Prah provides a bio-sketch of his impressive background which includes his secondary education at the well-known Achimota School during which the struggle for Ghana's independence was underway. At a tender age of 25, while a student in Amsterdam he provided a space in his house for "the Medical Committee Angola which was supplying medicines for the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLN'(xii). While a lecturer at Heidelberg University in the late 1960s, Prah was elected the Secretary General of Ghana National Students Organization. Thereafter, he returned to Accra where he provided resources for displaced Zimbabwe children and South West Africa Peoples Organization (SWAPO). In the mid 1970s he accepted teaching positions at the University of Zambia, Juba University, Sudan and University of Botswana where he taught and operated underground in various activities in support of African resistance in South Africa.

Like Du Bois, Makonnen, Nkrumah, Padmore among others whom Prah very deeply admired, he has devoted his entire life for African emancipation both on the continent and in the diaspora. He has also shown an active concern for the emancipation of other repressed people in Asia and South America. His ultimate interest is "the overall march of humanity towards greater freedom" (xiii). Prah outlines his book in the preface where he also set forth his basic arguments, among which are (1) Africans are overwhelmingly the most wretched of the earth, therefore, their emancipation is crucially important aspect of the global empowerment; (2) Africans, who have been for the most part black, have for centuries been oppressed by white people. As a result, the struggle against western domination tends to reflect black consciousness as a point of reference; (3) For centuries, color has been used as an instrument of African oppression even though the exploitation and oppression have been basically economic in nature; (4) Africaness transcends color. It embraces history and culture rather than biology. In short, it is colorless; (5) Western cruelties against non-western societies have been enormous; (6) African elites as a privileged group has forsaken its roots and adopt almost without exception all cultural and social habits of Westerners, as such, they are like "freed slaves who are unable to leave their old master;" (7) The elites who inherited power from colonial powers have a bad record in part, because, they loot the public treasury and invest their stolen wealth outside their countries; (8) The post-colonial state in Africa will die a shameful death; warlordism are signs of that demise; (9) None of the African states are socially and economically viable. The only way out for them is unity; and (10) Pan-Africanism, "an affirmation and assertion of African humanity, a spirit of indomitability, an attestation of the right and willingness of Africans to unite and seize their equality among

humankind," is the organizing principle which should be put in practice with the object of changing the real world.

Following the outline are four short articles, two of which were published in *The Weekly Review* (Nairobi) in 1984 (pp. 16-29). The first deals with the roots causes of the revolt in Sudan. Prah's argument is that, contrary to general belief, Sudan is not an Arab country. Arabs constitute only 38 percent of the population, according to the 1956 census, but have managed to control the socio-political life of the country. Through legislative acts and decrees, they have undermined African cultures in order to *Arabise and Islamize* them. Southern Sudanese who are predominantly Christian and Animist in their religious orientations thought they would be linked with East Africa to form a new state, but for British geopolitical interest, they were linked with the Arabised north which they continue to oppose since independence.

The next article (p.21) is a tribute to a Pan-African compatriot, Ras Makonnen. The short article chronicles his noteworthy life as someone who worked tirelessly for African unity at the expense of his family. He played a key role in the establishment of the OAU but became disenchanted with the post-colonial state's preoccupations with excessive materialism. He died peacefully amidst his two sons at an advanced age. The other two articles take stock of the Pan-Africanist Movement and what it needs to do to move forward. They were written in preparation of the Seventh Pan-African Congress.

Next are letters to individuals Prah variously addresses as "Comrade," "Friend," "Tajudeen," and "Barbara," interposed with the 1995 presentation to the conference on "Africa and the World" entitled, *"Beyond the Color Line, The Language of Pan-Africanism and the Pan-Africanism of Language,"* and a tribute to Joseph Oduho, "an African Patriot." (pp. 30- 113). These are, by far, the most substantive elements of the book. In a letter to "Comrade," entitled, *The Cause of Our Times--Pan-Africanism Revisited,* the author made several key points. He reviews the history of persistent warfare, conflicts, famine, and epidemics among other ills and concludes that "the deepening crisis of African society intimidates hope and condemns our immediate vision to a landscape of misery and desperation" (p. 30). Therefore, political and economic unity of Africans is, arguably, the only viable way to overcome petty divisiveness. But to unite, Prah has argued, Africans have to first answer the question: who is an African? Without answering this important question, no meaningful discussion of unity can be undertaken.

He asserts that

in too many parts of Africa, people who do not regard themselves as Africans are regarded as such by Africans. Being an African is virtually equated with citizenship. I think this is often deliberate and wicked... Without the recognition and usage of our historical and cultural baggage, we are no people. All peoples in the world develop and advance on the basis of their culture and history, while absorbing whatever can be absorbed from outside which improves what they already have, without abandoning their own. We cannot earn self-respect and equality in the eyes of other

people on this planet if demonstrate ourselves to be people without any historical or cultural belongings they are proud of, or will to keep (P. 33ft).

Prah has argued that because no group of people is "pure," therefore, racial definition of an African is not only flawed but unscientific. He correctly points out that while most Africans are black, not all Africans are black, nor do all blacks share cultural and historical affinity to Africa. Consequently, "there are many groups in Africa today which are not African, do not describe themselves as African or wish to be so regarded ... (p. 37). Thus, an African to Prah is not simply one with a particular skin color but rather someone who has cultural and historical roots in Africa and is conscious of his or her African identity.

After defining who an African is, Prah points out as he has done throughout the book that post-colonial African states are not economically and political viable. They are, without exception, mere institutional representations of partial devolution of imperial power, serving as inferior surrogates of imperial interests, while turning their backs against traditional values and uncritically embracing unsavory westernism (p. 40ff). To maintain the status quo, western powers have continuously engaged in quiet but effective support of local elites who perpetuate the culture of repression on the continent, not to mention the excessive pillaging and plunder of public resources. In addition, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund by their policies reinforce Africa's dependence on western powers. The result has been a steady decline of the quality of life in the past two decades. Therefore, Prah has averred that "Africa's development ... is inconceivable without unity, for without unity we would forever be pawns in the game of metropolitan powers dividing us... (p. 43). This section is probably the most substantive aspect of Prah's book.

Next, Prah briefly discusses the possibility of holding a Pan-African Congress in the diaspora, such as the United States of America because of the enormous benefits that may be derived. For instance, there are many who already identify with Africa in the United States and those who may be encouraged to do so. African citizenship should be opened to all but should by no means be imposed on anyone who may prefer to embrace other identities.

In the section entitled, "the Language of Pan-Africanism," the thrust of the author's argument is that Pan-Africanism is an ideology designed to emancipate and redignify the African people both on the continent and in the diaspora; victims of western racism. It is not meant to dominate, suppress or politically exclude non-Africans, but rather it provides Africans and people of African descent an opportunity to organize to resist oppression. Prah asserts that "no society which is scientifically and technologically advancing is achieving this on the basis of a language foreign to its peoples" (p. 89). Therefore, given the affinity which many African languages share with each as demonstrated in the book, Africans should adopt and utilize their own languages in the development process and leave aside "tribes" which anthropologists were invariably keen to "discover."

The next two pieces are 1996 letters to Tajudeen and Barbara which were primarily a

retrospection of the 1995 Manchester Pan-Africanist meeting and various issues relating to Pan-Africanism. Among these issues are the right of return for the Africans in the diaspora who wish to do so, the need to pursue emancipation of people of African descent in a democratic fashion, the need for a cultural renaissance which can empower the African masses and that while elements of Western and other cultures may be selectively adapted, "African advancement cannot go forward on the basis of Western culture (p. 113).

The remaining three sections of the book deal with the then nefarious minority regime in South Africa under the title "Deracializing Afrikanerdom." The other ones are reviews of *The Invention of Africa* by Mudimbe and Appiah's *In my Father's House*. The author points out that South Africa is the only place on the African continent where you will find various European groups, Indians, Chinese, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Christians and people of other religions who have become compatriots because they have been thrown together as a matter of history. But, he has argued that rather than the tremendous advantages the cultural mix might have brought, the country is turned into a caste system where "until recently ... the lighter you were, the more you were socially endowed and rewarded ... 70 percent of the national... product went to the 16 percent white minority who own 87 percent of the land" (p. 114). After reviewing and critiquing various aspects of South African history, Prah concludes that "certainly, the notion of race is a bankrupt idea" (p. 126). His review of the aforementioned books is quite insightful, except to say that he was quite gracious to Appiah who is clearly an apologist for colonialism.

Prah's book is a penetrating and an incredibly insightful analysis of Pan-Africanism as a framework for the emancipation of Africans, both on the continent and in the diaspora. I agree with Prah on all the major points raised in the book. Like other Pan-Africanists before him, he does not just write about the concept but he practices it; strenuously arguing that devising strategies to unify Africans is the only way to undo the derogation of their social credentials. The book should be refreshing even to those that think PanAfricanism is dead and buried.

Overall, this is an excellent scholarly effort. The only minor pitfall is that Prah has insisted throughout the book that "democratic practice must rule all areas of activity," but never explained his conception of democracy and whether decisions reached democratically are necessarily the "right" ones. Because the book is a series of articles written over time, it has not been easy to organize it as coherently as possible. While it is even tautological in some areas, the consistency and rigor of Prah's ideas has never been in doubt. Third World Press, Inc., should invite Professor Prah to conceive and write a book on Pan-Africanism from the beginning to the end. Students of Pan-Africanism will benefit immensely from his experience and insights. In the meantime, I like his work under review enough to adopt it for my class this semester.

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