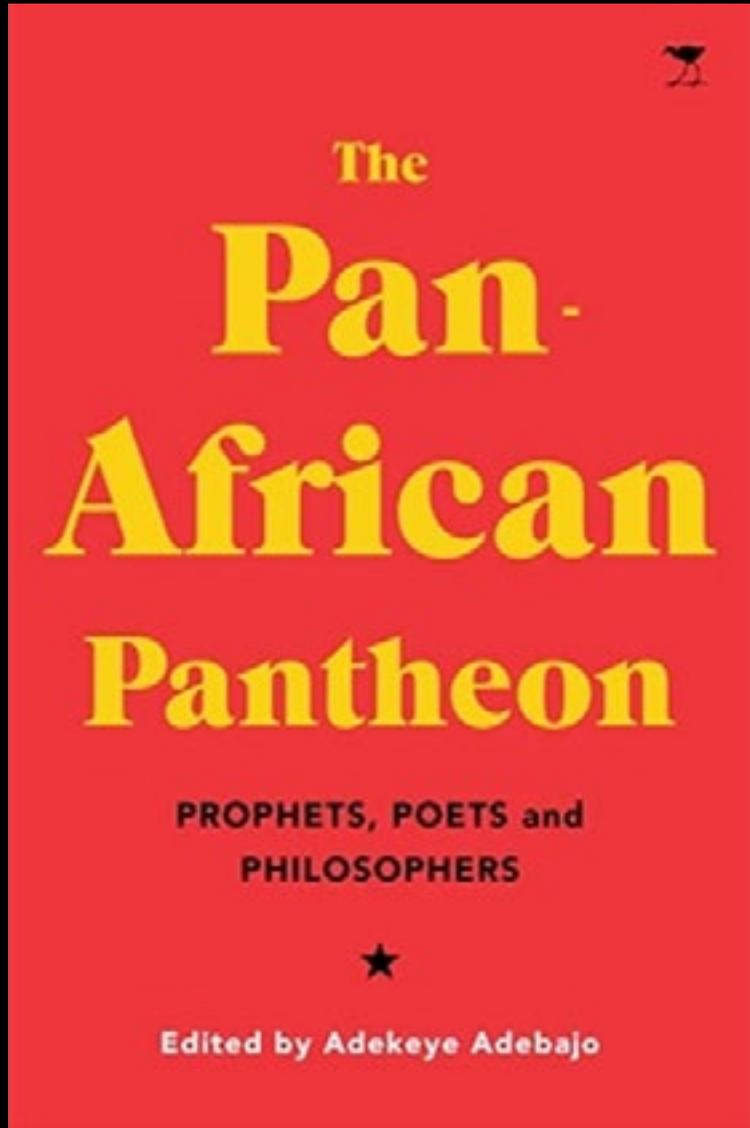


**Book Review:**

# The Pan-African Pantheon: Prophets, Poets and Philosophers

edited by Adekeye Adebajo



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By Tshepo Mvulane Moloji

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Advocates and critics of literature on Pan-Africanism stand to studiously benefit from this contemporary book on the theme of Pan-Africanism, meticulously edited by Nigerian scholar Adekeye Adebajo. For the record, Adebajo is the incumbent Director of the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). When contextualised, this edited text is certainly a welcome addition to the discourse on Pan-Africanism. This book adroitly adds to contributions made by other scholars who have also addressed the theme of Pan-Africanism. A sample of preceding texts include Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood's *Pan-Africanism History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora since 1787* (2003), followed by Guy Martin's *African Political Thought* (2012), and Marika Sherwood's *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora* (2012). Observably, Adebajo's text shares the same publication year as African-American Reiland Rabaka's edited volume *The Routledge Handbook of Pan-Africanism* (2020). From this list of scholars, one may justly opine that the theme of Pan-Africanism has been addressed by scholars from around the world.

Adebajo's introductory chapter to the collection cogently points out key details about this book, and eruditely provides an array of definitions of Pan-Africanism (what 'it is' and 'is not'), while tracing the 'origins of Pan-Africanism historically to the two scourges of European slavery and colonialism' (Adebajo, 2020: 7). The collection offers 38 chapters about both pioneering and contemporary Pan-Africanists. Although Adebajo deserves to be credited for his duteous acknowledgement of the aforementioned texts, he mostly explicates how his book differs from them. Although Adebajo acknowledges that there are similarities with Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood's text, a key difference is that while Adi and Sherwood's very useful compendium has 3-5-page biographical sketches of each Pan-African figure, Adebajo's volume has more substantive 15-20-page essays (Adebajo, 2020: 4). The latter 'go beyond the short biographies of these figures to examine the struggles in which they were involved within a broader historical and contemporary context' (Adebajo, 2020: 4). Differing from Rabaka's text, Adebajo's collection is 'organised thematically rather than biographically or regionally...We have thus not imposed any theoretical or philosophical framework on any of the authors' (Adebajo, 2020: 5). Regarding limits,

he says: 'Our volume does not attempt to develop any theory or philosophy of Pan-Africanism. Instead, we set out the history of Pan-Africanism and the evolution, interaction and intellectual ideas and impact of the 36 Pan-African figures covered in this book' (Adebajo, 2020: 4-5).

What may be the flaws of this book? In sum, its omissions. Among others, in the category of 'pioneers' (in Part 2) and the 'female' Pan-Africanists (only seven were featured in stark contrast to 29 males). It is not an understatement to mention that no reason can justify such a gender bias. It is disappointing that Adebajo's text omitted chapters on some 'pioneering Pan-African pantheons' who undoubtedly laid the foundation of Pan-Africanism. In particular, this omission covers figures such as Trinidad and Tobago-born Henry Sylvester Williams (shockingly only mentioned five times) even though Adebajo mentions in his opening chapter that Williams is 'credited with having coined the terms 'Pan-African' and 'Pan-Africanism'' (2020: 22). South African Alice Victoria Kinloch or AVK is not focused on either (sparsely addressed by Aldon Morris in Chapter 4 and Colin Grant in Chapter 5). This criticism is mindful that, elsewhere, Sylvester Williams (as he is commonly called) has arguably received his fair share of attention which is quite in contrast to AVK [1]. It is with disappointing dismay that I note how AVK's marginalisation persists to date. As present scholars concerned with overcoming patriarchal hegemonies, and as part of decolonial scholarship, cases such as AVK's marginalisation challenge us to address such gaps.

It must also be noted that Adebajo's claim of Sylvester Williams having 'founded the African Association in London in September 1897 to lobby the British parliament and public opinion to oppose the violence of European colonial rule in Africa' (2020: 22) is deceptive. To be clear, what is refuted is not the action taken by Sylvester Williams but the false claim about him having been the 'founder' of The African Association. What is even more concerning is that Adebajo is not alone in making such a misleading claim, as other contributors in the book under discussion, such as Aldon Morris (2020: 96), are just as guilty of the same misrepresentation. The following primary source ought to assist in arresting any existing doubts that Sylvester Williams was contextually only one individual of the three who count as the co-founders of The African Association. The following words are quite telling: 'In presenting this the first Annual Report of the African Association to our

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friends, it is well to mention that the founders were Mr. H.S. Williams, Mr. T.J. Thompson, and Mrs. A.V. Kinloch’ (Williams, 1898: 1). Even if it was never Adebajo’s intention to do so, his and Morris et al.’s aforesaid claim(s) unfortunately centre patriarchal views.

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In the final analysis, prospective readers of Adebajo’s book should advisably consider assessing it according to the following three key points:

There are unique features about this volume. Firstly, as the 38 essays are written by African, Caribbean and African-American scholars largely

based in their regions, the book contributes substantively to efforts to transform curricula in all three regions and across the globe; secondly the book covers 36 major Pan-African figures in a bid to build a contemporary Pan-African canon; and thirdly, the volume encourages a cross-general dialogue between scholars, as well as between past figures of Pan-Africanism and more contemporary ones with whom current students would already be familiar (Adebajo, 2020: 6–7).

Ultimately, besides this book’s shortcomings, it is a timely and valuable text on Pan-Africanism. I agree that ‘It comes at a time of increasing interest in Pan-African thought and Africa’s International Relations’ (Adebajo, 2020: 6). Only time will tell, however, if indeed the editor’s claim is realised of ‘seeking to ensure that Pan-African knowledge forms part of knowledge production [and] forms part of, and influences, mainstream global thinking’ (Adebajo, 2020: 6). The overall richness of Pan-Africanist insights from this book compels it to be considered as ‘a must read’.

#### Notes

[1] In addition to the earlier mentioned Marika Sherwood’s *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa, and the African Diaspora* (2012), there are full-length biographies about Sylvester Williams. A sample list may at least commence from the American biographer and alleged former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent James R. Hooker’s *Henry Sylvester Williams: Imperial Pan-Africanist* (1975), fellow Trinidadian Owen Charles Mathurin’s *Henry Sylvester Williams and the Origins of the Pan-African Movement, 1869-1911* (1976) and alas another Trinidadian scholar Dr. Ronald Noel wrote his Masters in Philosophy (MPhil) Thesis entitled *Henry Sylvester-Williams: a new enquiry into the old hero* (2006).

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