Research Africa Reviews Vol. 4 No. 3, December 2020

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Agnes Ofosu Vandyck Molly Nyagura & Rosemary Brooks (Editors), *African Visionaries.* Translated into English by Mary. E. K Dakubu and Eva Maria Asante. Accra, Ghana: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2019. 334 pages. ISBN 978-9988-8829-9-0.

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The crisis bedevilling Africa's under-development; this is a major theme that experts from diverse disciplines have been grappling with. While there have been considerable scholarly works addressing most of the themes associated with Africa's challenges, little interest has been devoted to analysing the biographies of African activists, and more specifically, their roles in addressing developmental issues.

Focusing on African activists' biographies offers stimulating perspectives on the unique roles that Africa's sons and daughters have played in confronting the myriad of developmental challenges that have received marginal interest. This book is a collection of short biographical essays of several African activists; each of whom has played unique roles in their attempt to address the continent's challenges.

Besides the fact that the book consists of over forty chapters, its scope is interdisciplinary and discusses a wide range of themes; these cover politics, environment, African identity, gender, human rights, and religion, among others. The selection by the editors was not restricted to a specific time frame, but it includes pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial activists. Examining each author's biography highlights an important point that Africans, regardless of their backgrounds, were critical and concerned about the diverse challenges confronting their communities.

For the sake of brevity, I select some of the African activists who are discussed in this book. My selection was guided by themes that reflect on slavery, women's empowerment, African identity, and neo-colonialism. I review, with particular interest, the biographies of Olaudah Equiano, Anta Diop, Aminata Traore, Kwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara and Ken Saro-Wiwa as presented in this volume. I employed descriptive approach to the review in order to outline the thrust of each individual's biography.

Olaudah Equiano: To start with, the biography of Olaudah Equiano, also called Gustavus Vassa, offers fascinating reading as an eye witness' accounts regarding the ordeals of enslaved Africans. Karfa Sira Diallo examines the biography of Olaudah Equiano under the title "*The First Black Activist against the Slave Trade*." The author argues that Equiano made himself relevant when he acquired education and documented his experiences as a slave; it provides us with first-hand information about the life experiences of an enslaved individual and other Africans in slavery conditions. Equiano's writings highlight the fact that slaves were subjected to racial abuse and inhumane brutalities; and some were even beaten to death. This highlights an important point that Africans have always yearned for freedom, common humanity, and social equality with other races. Born in Nigeria to an Igbo ethnic family in Iseke in 1745, Equiano was captured at the age of eleven along with his sister by African slave hunters. This changed his life as he became less known in Africa but popular in Europe. While Equiano's monument can be found in the French city of Nante, most Africans neither know him nor have they heard of his role in the black people's struggle for freedom.

Unlike most enslaved people who worked on plantations, Equiano spent most of his life with marine officers as a sailor. Sold to an English marine lieutenant, Michael Henry Pascal, in 1757 at the age of 12, Equiano was educated and baptised into Christianity. The most outstanding of Equiano's contributions in the emancipation of Africans in slavery conditions was when he became acquainted with English civilisation. This changed his destiny for he became a major figure of the enlightenment; through his literary works, he spoke out against slavery.

Anta Diop: In contrast with Olaudah Equiano's experience as a slave, reading Cheikh Anta Diop's (1923-1986) biography underscores the fact that he was critical about the crisis of identity that Africans were confronted with; this was as a result of the colonial influence across the continent. Diop spent most of his intellectual life questioning the root causes of African identity crises in the post-colonial period. The gist of his position is that the colonial project did not aim only at imposing its political structures, but it also promoted European cultural and racial superiority in Africa. He thus saw Africans engage in neo-colonial, cultural and racial warfare with Europe to overcome the inferiority status they encountered. Diop's biography was the subject of analysis by Mustapha Diallo and it was titled *"The Return of the Pharaoh"*.

Diallo argues that Diop was not only privileged to acquire Western education at a tender age, but he came from a well-respected religious lineage in Senegal. His upbringing was shaped by the autonomous vision of society of his uncle; Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of the Muridyya Brotherhood. While Bamba fought colonialism through pacifist resistance, Diop adopted intellectual radicalism to outline the colonial agenda in Africa. Diop's intellectual transformation and quest for African identity was a consequence of his dissatisfaction with the manner that the European system of education depicted Africans; in this system, they were described as 'ignorant,' 'uncivilised' and 'immoral.' This made Diop realise the subtle racial and cultural motive behind European colonialism, which was intended to overlook African legacy in world civilisation. The nagging question that Diop struggled to answer was how Africa could overcome European stereotype. Consequently, he proposed a solution that "Africa has to help Europe to let go of the bad habits it has acquired during colonialism". While this statement is pregnant with several meanings, it highlighted that Europe has succeeded in projecting a negative image about Africans as an inferior human race, which he believed ought to be re-examined.

Relying on his multi-disciplinary scholarly background, Diop, nicknamed "*The Last Pharaoh*" utilised historical sources to counter the European stereotypes. Using the Ghanaian Empire as an example, he questioned why the perceived 'primitive' people were able to build a political structure since 1250; it was one that consisted of different languages, diverse religions and various cultural orientations that co-existed with each other. He further challenged the popular perception that Greek academics, who visited Egypt, pioneered the foundation of modern sciences. Citing Thale of Miletus and his discovery of the theorem at the site of the pyramids' shadows, Diop argued that Thale might have appropriated the knowledge from Egypt. He rhetorically asked: why could he not have found out the same in Greece, and what were their missions in Egypt?

Aminata Traore: While the biographical trajectory of Aminata Dramane Traore highlighted her struggles with women's empowerment, she was equally critical about neo-liberal policies proposed by multi-national institutions on Africa. Traore has been struggling to appreciate the sharp disparity between Africa and European nations in terms of development. Consequently, she addressed Africa's developmental challenges both from an intellectual perspective and as an agent of development. "*The End of Domination*" was the title that

Rokhaya Diallo proposed for Aminata Dramane Traore's biography. The author explored how Traore kept on reflecting throughout her education about Africa's developmental challenges. She questioned why there was a difference in development between Europe and Africa? And she too asked: What effect does this inequality have on the thinking of Africans? Consequently, Traore undertook her doctoral dissertation with her focus on "*Development of identity among African youth*".

Like Diop, Traore's upbringing has considerably influenced her orientation on issues of Africa development. She began her life in a French West African country, Mali, where the education system segregated the mulattoes from the natives. This affected her life and underlined the microcosm of the macrocosm in the racial power politics in post-colonial Africa. In her view, the system of segregation had a psychological effect on children's development as they were not allowed to play together during break. On women empowerment, the first challenge Traore encountered was how to come to terms with policies on women's status in modern societies. She was struck to realise that external experts who drafted policies on women empowerment knew little about the realities of African women. Secondly, when she took up a job with the United Nations for the advancement of women and the improvement of water supply in Africa, it exposed her to the realities of Africa's under-development. Consequently, Traore approaches these complex challenges by founding an organisation with the theme "*The De-colonisation of Research on Women*". This enabled her to engage with policymakers on Africa's development issues.

Diallo succinctly outlines the most remarkable analysis emanating from Aminata Traore's understanding of why Africa was under-developed arguing that the policies of multi-national organisations and prescriptions were only to maximise their investment rather than to benefit the continent. Some of the policy prescriptions ended up imposing considerable economic hardships on ordinary Africans taking into consideration the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program's (SAP) which attempted to reduce wasteful expenditure on water, health and education.

Beyond being an expert in development, Traore was also a prolific academic who deployed her intellectual prowess to explore the causes of Africa's under-development. In Traore's analysis of the role of international development partners in Africa, she argued that, "They have only globalised hopelessness, anguish and hunger" since African countries have become the football of neoliberal politics which destroy local economies. In another breath, Traore argues that Africa's under-development was not solely caused by Western policies as some African elites have created the conditions for external manipulations; and they betrayed their people and sometimes paid passive attention to these matters. Consequently, the passion with which Traore attached to Africa development agenda necessitated her to found the African Social Forum to serve as a watchdog and a means of measuring policies and their implications on the continent.

Ken Saro-Wiwa: Helon Habila authored the chapter that concentrated on *"For The Ogoni and against Shell"*; it reflected on the legacy and struggles initiated by Ken Saro-Wiwa on the wanton destruction of the environment by oil companies in Bonny of Ogoniland. The chapter explored Saro-Wiwa's biography, including the diverse modes of struggles he deployed to awaken his people's consciousness. According to the author, the image of Saro-Wiwa generated contrasting perceptions among Nigerians. In one breath, he was regarded as a Nigerian patriot, nationalist, environmentalist, writer, poet, essayist, playwright; and from another angle, he was perceived as being notoriously a murderer. The murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa raised a question about the extent to which multi-national businesses could achieve their interest even if their roles cause the under-development of local communities. Saro-Wiwa's biography underscored how destiny pitted him against the political regime and international

organisations. Saro-Wiwa began his career as an administrator of Bonny, an oil exporting firm in the Niger Delta, which had been won back following the long Biafra War.

Emerging in the period preceding the Biafra war (1967-1970), Saro-Wiwa's activities further heightened the tension among the Ogoni people; they dominated the public debates. He was, however, mindful about the effect of the Biafra War, which polarised the Ogoni people into factionalism and undermined their sense of unity. The author illustrated this view by extracting an example in Saro-Wiwa's book, "*A Novel in Rotten English"*; herein he recalled a young boy called Sozaboy (a corruption of 'a soldier boy') who went to the army and hoped to return as a hero with the idea of attracting Dukana's most beautiful women. However, the outcome of the war suggested that there were neither heroes nor villains, with the Ogoni land having been lost. Sadly, Saro-Wiwa also grew up to experience different forces undermining the development of his people. The activities of multi-national oil companies in particular were not only destroying the environment, but they displaced the source of livelihood of farmers in Ogoni land. Saro-Wiwa observed the leaky and rusty pipelines of oil running through the city, while streams and farmlands were polluted and unsuitable for cultivation. The consequence of these destructions on the survival of the future generation was the key question that Saro-Wiwa reflected on.

When Saro-Wiwa took up a task to awaken the consciousness of his people, it polarised the rank of Ogoniland's members; this betrayed him and it caused his death. For his unwavering commitment to the Ogoni people's challenges, Saro-Wiwa earned a reputation as an environmentalist and the defender of the subalterns' rights. While Saro-Wiwa passed on, his activities lit the light of environmental consciousness; and it rekindled his legacy in Ogoniland in particular and Nigeria in general. As a result of internal crisis among the executive association of the Ogoni union, Saro-Wiwa refocused his activism in literary production with the purpose of bringing to the fore his people's plight. While the diverse roles that Saro-Wiwa played shot him to fame as an influential figure, he was equally marked by the military regime as a potentially destabilising figure in Nigerian politics.

According to Habila, the catalyst of Saro-Wiwa's murder was when he re-designated his movement as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). The movement's militant outlook and Saro-Wiwa's demands and threats against oil companies caused his death. When Saro-Wiwa insisted that the oil companies would have to kill all the men, women, and children of the Ogoni before they could extract oil, this necessitated the regime to take action; it thus arrested him and disrupted his political activities. The author concluded that Saro-Wiwa was finally hanged by the Abacha regime, though Shell could not escape partial blame. While Saro-Wiwa met his untimely death, his message resonated forcefully and was synonymous with environmental preservation as a key for the survival of humanity; and the Ogoni were used as a classical case. Saro-Wiwa's struggle and death underscored an important lesson that we do not always fight to see the outcome; and bearing in mind this, he left behind an indelible legacy.

Kwame Nkrumah: There is no doubt that the torchbearer of Africa's liberation and its de-colonisation movement was Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah's biography was fascinatingly analysed by Bernard Akoi-Jackson, who titled it "*Osagyefo the Victorious Hero"*. Nkrumah represented not only an enigmatic figure in African politics, but he was a non-conformist in global power politics. According to the author, Nkrumah's famous declaration was that 'we neither face East nor West, but forward'. This crystallised a new dispensation of the role of Africa in world politics. However, the world's super-powers understood the declaration's implications that went against their foreign policies and this set the stage for them to scheme against Kwame Nkrumah. The author traced the shaping of Nkrumah's ideological worldview

by referring to his socialisation with African Americans in an anti-colonial fraternity at Lincoln University in the USA. Born to a merchant and goldsmith, Nkrumah came from a modest family background and was educated at the prestigious Achimota School in the Gold Coast. Furthermore, in Manchester, Nkrumah played a tremendous role in the organisation of the Pan African Congress, which consolidated his thought on pan-Africanism from a de-colonisation and non-aligned perspectives.

The author outlined the pattern of power politics in the early post-colonial period, exploring the growing influence of China that threatened the Soviet Union, which had ideological differences with the West. Thus, the unpredictable foreign policies of Nkrumah were a major concern for most of the power blocs of the time. Depending on declassified sources, the author argued that the overthrow of Nkrumah was orchestrated by the Soviet Union, while the CIA was well aware of this event. In the author's view, Nkrumah's overthrow was due to his unyielding posture that countered the Soviet Union and the USA's demands. Furthermore, Nkrumah's "United Nations of Africa" was a policy most of his contemporaries were unenthusiastic about. Beyond these external challenges, Nkrumah's domestic policies largely contributed to his final overthrow, and it was argued that his authoritarian leadership caused his deposal in 1966.

Thomas Sankara: Like Kwame Nkrumah, the neo-colonialist structures that were prevalent in the Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) were the dominant political issues that Thomas Sankara considered as the evil forces undermining his society. Sankara's biography was assessed by Mustapha Diallo, who reflected on *"The Soldier of People"*. Sankara's biography highlighted the identity politics that pitted him against the larger society both socially and politically. In exploring the basis of Thomas Sankara's socialist-orientated and anti-neo-colonialist thoughts, the author argued that these were attributable to his childhood upbringing. Citing his family background as an example, the author argued that Sankara was born from different ethnic background, namely Fulbe and Mossi who seldomly sanctioned marriages between themselves. This was because the children from such marriages were not well-accepted in the society. Secondly, Sankara had a bitter experience in the French schooling system as his father had to endure the crime that Sankara committed when he stole a bicycle from a French man's son. His father was also jailed for the fact that Sankara beat a French student who burnt the flag of the newly liberated country, Upper Volta, from colonial rule. These experiences shaped Sankara's socialist orientation and earned the appellation as "*Army of the People*". He defined his career in the army as "a soldier without political consciousness is a trained perpetrator". Burkina represented a case where the army exercised considerable influence on power politics since political independence and Sankara's image loomed large in politics since the 1980s when he was recruited into the army.

The sterling charisma of Sankara coupled with his honesty made him a household name in the army and national politics. When a new crop of soldiers initiated a coup in November 1980, they appointed him as the Secretary for Information. He reluctantly accepted this post to re-echo democratic renewal in his country. It did not take long for the regime to adopt insensitive posture since it could not meet the political expectation of the citizens; and it thus resorted to banning strikes and agitations from civil societies. Interestingly, Sankara reacted to the ban that "Woe to those who want to gag the people!". According to the author, when this regime was overthrown, Sankara was consequently made the Prime Minister because of his charisma; it enabled him to implement his vision. It was at this time that he heightened his anti-imperialist ideas and portrayed a modest lifestyle.

Inspired by Samory Touré's resistance, he made a famous declaration that "Ouagadougou will be the *bolibana* (end) of imperialism". His penchant neo-colonialist rhetoric endeared him to many. When he was arrested for his neo-colonialist thoughts, this led to mass protest, leading to his release, and subsequently the regime was overthrown. At the peak of his political thought, Sankara defined his political philosophy as a moment of radical cultural renewal. This placed him in a position that caused him to confront the diverse forces of the time. Like Nkrumah, Sankara re-named the country from Upper Volta to Burkina Faso (*Land of the Righteous People*). Diallo argued that Sankara's foreign policies were tilted towards solidarity with other oppressed countries. He inspired black South Africans to resist the apartheid rule and he, at the same time, initiated the Pan-Africanist drive with African Diaspora. Sankara demonstrated his dislike towards the Western powers for their disrespect of African leaders; and he was compelled to offer his guests with a shaky armchair under the guise of Burkina Faso's poor economic conditions could not afford luxurious goods. His fiery and neo-colonialist rhetoric generated more tensions, making him a bad leader in the eyes of world leaders. Sankara was ambushed on October 15th, 1987; and he was murdered and buried in a collective grave. Interestingly, his death certificate described a 'natural death'.

This book is indeed a timely publication, considering that it offered concise biographies of some African activists; and it filled a vacuum in academia. The book, however, lacked a proper thematic arrangement and chronology of events. This might have been necessitated by the fact that the authors focused on the biography of these activists without regard to the period of their emergence. In the reviewer's opinion, the book's chapters should have been organized along specific periods and this would have illuminated a few important points; it would, for example, have highlighted the activists' contribution in addressing Africa's crisis. What was observed was that when one read a topic on environmental or political issues in the first few chapters, one found a related theme that appeared either in the middle or towards the end. This did not promote coherence and systematic arrangement of the themes. One, however, enjoyed reading the individual biography in relation to the period's challenges. The topics' haphazard arrangements may also be considered an argument against it since anyone who has an interest in certain issues such as Africa's pre-colonial or colonial challenges would have to search for the relevant topic. Despite these shortcomings, the book was an interesting read; and I would recommend it to any university student whether he/she comes from the social sciences or from any of the other faculties. The book is extremely relevant to young African political activists who want to learn more about the role that the previous generation's leadership played.

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ISSN 2575-6990