

Book Review

Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935 - 1961 by James H. Meriwether, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2002.

Reviewed by Kofi Ankomah

Africa continues to be a marginalized place needing to be “uplifted and redeemed,” according to much Western media reportage. To them, Africa is confronted with formidable difficulties including: heavy burdens of external debt; declining world prices for most of her exports; barriers to many global markets; and shortage of investment and finance.

In addition, the rising toll of the scourge of HIV/AIDS continues to reduce the economic might of Africa, by as much as a third within the past decade in several countries. Indeed, Africa requires enormous economic and political reform, heavy infrastructure and human capital investment as well as appropriate institutional structures and processes to combat her unceasing poverty and crushing debt crises. Africa ranks highest among the poorest in the world, forming the bulk of the world’s most **heavily indebted poorest countries (HIPC)**, thanks to the colonial legacy, with its bequeathed structures, that has propagated intractable problems as part of the “gift of independence.” With nearly half of her population living below two dollars a day, Africa is overwhelmed by man-made obstacles, including declining receipts for her produce and natural resources exports (prices of which are determined by the buyers) while she continues to pay heavily for her imports for sustenance at prices determined and manipulated by the sellers. Africa is poor in the mist of her rich natural resources, which remain untapped in many places. Yet investment capital continues to elude her.

Africa, though marginalized, is growing to be a significant partner to the United States as some American companies continue to invest in Africa. Indeed, American investment in Africa is significant and growing, especially in oil and gas production and beverages such as Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola. It is estimated that the United States currently imports over fifteen percent of her oil from Africa and that this figure is likely to increase in the future. But though Africa remains a

highly marginalized continent in deep crisis it is far from “the propaganda that all of Africa was primitive and dirty”, to quote Coretta Scott King.” (p164); Africa has been and can be a source of inspiration and pride to African Americans. In the African struggle for emancipation, the Black American gained the assurance that there are “no second class children of God” and that there is nothing but pride in “feeling African” and “being African.” The African’s opportunity to prove himself as a free person became the opportunity for the black American to prove she/he too is able to obtain freedom, as freedom is possible for all (p. 163).

The story of the suffering of the Negro in America in all its ineffable and calculated inhumanity needs no retelling and Meriwether does well in not telling the history of the black struggle in America. Meriwether does, however, excel in his examination of African Americans’ attitude to the African struggle for emancipation from the colonial rule in its varied manifestations from the passive resistance approach through to armed struggle. Meriwether is very perceptive in his examination of the shifting meaning of Africa as portrayed by Black Americans, dwelling on research information from the top black press, personal correspondence of people like Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, W. E. B. Du Bois as well as oral history. It is revealing to note for example that Dr. Martin Luther King first met Richard Nixon, then Vice President of the United States, in Accra, Ghana during Ghana’s independence celebrations.

In *Proudly We Can Be Africans Black Americans and Africa, 1935 – 1961*, James H. Meriwether examines the awakening relationship – “ranging from ambivalence and disregard to solidarity and return” - between the African Americans and Africans that resulted in the transformation of Negroes into African American and to their “feeling African and being African.” It is a book of powerful intellectual quality, with lucidity of expression and an excellent command of the relevant literature. Meriwether combines these qualities with excellent historical and political analysis of the African conditions in an original fashion and exhumes the rot of indoctrination and oppression heaped on the Negro in racist America.

The central focus of Meriwether is that there has been a shift in value and implication of contemporary Africa in African American intellectual and political life, during the period between 1935 and 1961. Meriwether argues that though some Negro missionaries and advocates of migration to Africa discussed historical Africa in glowing terms, they did not in fact have much respect for the African of their day. Prior to 1935, they saw the African of the day only through the ideological miasma propagated by their mutual oppressors. Meriwether writes, “Pride in Africa’s past had its proponents, but pride in the present remained much rarer. The idea of ‘civilization’ continued to be a key stumbling block. Western ideas of civilization still established the lens through which African Americans viewed Africa and accordingly most saw modern Africans as, on the whole semi barbaric.” (p. 41) According to Meriwether, seven cumulative events, each of which constitutes a chapter of the book – (1) The Italo-Ethiopian war (1936-36), Meri-

wether writes, “whereas before the war most African American felt they had little to learn from contemporary Africans, after the Ethiopian crisis African Americans increasingly started taking direct lessons from modern Africa (p. 55). (2) The struggle against colonialism (1941-1950), African Americans learned from the anti colonial struggles in Africa that they too are “part of a larger struggle.” (3) Apartheid and non-violent resistance in South Africa (1948-1953), provided the inspiration for “non violent direct action, an approach not widely advocated by the African Americans at the time.” (4) The Mau Mau revolutionary violence, seen as a ferment for change (1952-58) (p. 133), (5) Ghana’s independence (1957-58), during which Nkrumah pushed African Americans to transform their use of Africa. Through the Ghana prism, African American gained a broader perspective of the world (p. 179). (6) the year of Africa (1960) enabled the civil rights leaders to institutionalize a political relationship with independent Africa (p. 207) and (7) Congo’s independence and its aftermath (1960-1961) helped to frame African Americans’ ensuing discourse about Africa – have redefined the relationship between the African American and the African. While Meriwether’s portrayal of the shift in perception of African Americans of Africans is fascinating, it is his analysis of the impact of Africans on the African American’s struggle against repression and bigotry in America that commends attention. The generation of an aura of liberation, self consciousness and self identity that replaced the poison of self-hatred inflicted by an oppressive system on the American Negro is a lasting impact that Africa has made on America. Radical blacks will always credit the role of the Africa of the 50’s and 60’s in their struggle for black emancipation in America. However, it is hard to believe that after what they have achieved in America to date, very little concerted effort has been made by African Americans to assist in building Africa for the benefit of all.

Black Americans can be a critical mass to build strong foundation for lobbying to shape America’s strategy for addressing Africa’s development needs. They can also be a potent force in shaping American interest in Africa. They can also steer America from following the lead of European ex-colonial powers regarding African affairs. Rejuvenation of Africa’s economies requires sustained and concerted attention of the international community, including sweeping debt relief, heightened development assistance, improved access to international markets, and better incentives for trade and investment. In all these, U.S. leadership can be crucial in setting an agenda for reform and assistance, and marshaling resources to support Africa-led recovery. Black Americans can in partnership with their African kith and kin help to secure progress on debt relief, private investment, and job generation to create stable political environments for African development. As a critical force Black Americans can mobilize to influence American foreign policy to support promising Africa-led initiatives, just as the Jewish do in American policies for Israel.

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