

I

The book under review is a pocket-sized but thoughtful and closely argued political biography of Thabo Mbeki, the former President of the Republic of South Africa, whose presidency of his country served more or less as the denouement of his apprenticeship and later frontline role in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and the broader liberation movement in Southern Africa. A major objective of the book, we are told, is 'to rescue Mbeki from the parochialism of South African perspectives and restore him to his rightful stature as an important pan-African political figure'.

This is a large task to undertake and execute in a pocket-sized book. The author tells us that the book is written for 'three key reasons': 'the need to place Mbeki in a pan-African as much as a South African context...'; to fill the yawning gaps left by a lacuna in books about Mbeki, by focusing on his foreign, particularly African, policy and his legacy as president; and to 'correct the glaring absence of black authors as biographers of African political figures' (p.11).

My inference from reading the book is that the task has been well accomplished and the reader is the richer for this reason. It is well-written, concise, clear, robustly argumentative and engagingly fascinating. Nevertheless, the book raises several questions, providing answers to some, equivocating on others, and raising more questions in the process of answering some of them, while leaving the reader to make up his/her mind about what the answers are or should be. This is to be expected of a thoughtful and provocative book. What it offers is a sympathetic tapestry of the political career of President Mbeki but one that is woven from variegated threads to reflect the complex, sometimes tortuous, path that Mbeki's ambiguous career crisscrossed.

II

How did I reach this conclusion? My answer, hopefully, will emerge from a consideration of some of the following questions: How did the book set about weaving the variegated tapestry? What is the picture of the man that emerges out of the tapestry? Why describe him as a philosopher king? What are the highlights, what the critical milestones and what the contradictions that drove, shaped and defined him and his political career? What is his vision of a democratic South Africa and of development, within the broader

The Ambiguous Role of the Intellectual as Statesman

L. Adele Jinadu

Thabo Mbeki: Africa's Philosopher King

by Adekeye Adebajo

A Jacana Pocket Biography, 2016, 187 pages, ISBN 978-1-4314-2330-9, no price

context of his vision of African unity and development? What kind of nationalist and pan-Africanist was he? Was he able to reconcile, and if so how, the tensions between being a nationalist and being a pan-Africanist? What kind of a president was he, and what controversies dogged his presidency? What does the tapestry tell us about human nature in politics, and of the promise, challenges and limitations of politics as a vocation? What did the tapestry leave out, and why? This review now proceeds to address some of these questions.

III

How did the book weave the tapestry? The Introduction (pp. 7-11) paints a portrait of Mbeki as an important player '...in laying the foundations for a post-apartheid state...' It places 'him within an African context' (p. 8) and portrays him as 'a complex figure, full of contradictions and paradoxes' (p. 9), who was 'shaped by his social environment...' (p. 10). This portrait is elaborated in the rest of the book. I now proceed to tease out the argument of each chapter.

The first chapter utilizes the concept of philosopher-king, popularized by Plato, to underscore the driving force behind Mbeki's political career, comparing and contrasting Mbeki's political practice and achievements with those of another African philosopher-king, President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. The chapter also points out the limitations in playing the role of philosopher-king, arguing that 'the biblical saying that prophets are not honoured in their land epitomizes [their] fate...' (pp. 13-14) in their respective countries.

The second chapter offers a condensed and succinct account of the 'formative experiences (up until the completion of his studies at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK in 1966) that helped to shape Thabo Mbeki's future politics'. It traces and

analyzes the development of his early political consciousness and political activism, dating back to his joining the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League at the age of 14 in 1959 and the underground South African Communist Party at the age of 20 (p. 31).

The formative experiences, however, contained intimations of the problematic and sour relations with a number of critical cadres of the ANC that dogged Mbeki's accession to power within the ANC and eventually his presidency of the country. The chapter characterizes his defining attributes as 'political pragmatism', preference for 'evolutionary [over]

revolutionary change'; 'a reputation...for being arrogant and ambitious.' These attributes gave rise to 'resentment' against his 'improvised polyglot identity', and to envy because 'he had been sent to England, rather than the Soviet Union, where most ANC cadres had studied...' (p. 37). The

resentment resurfaced in the years leading to the transition to black majority rule in South Africa, with members of the ANC's military wing belittling his '...lack of military prowess,' regarding him 'as more of a theoretical intellectual than a liberation fighter, someone who was more comfortable with a pen than a pistol' (p. 42), and on account of which 'some military cadres vowed never to be led by him' (p. 43).

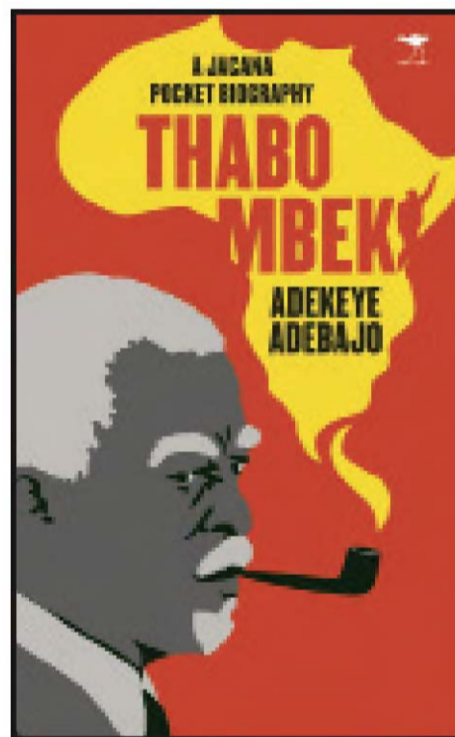
The third chapter recounts Mbeki's marriage to Zanele Dlamini in 1974 and his thorny path to the leadership of the ANC, beginning from 1967, when he started to work in the propaganda section of the ANC in London (p. 40), to 1999, when he became the President of South Africa (p. 69). Returning to Africa after almost 20 years of exile abroad, Mbeki served in various ANC missions in Botswana, Zambia, and Nigeria, during which he built, cultivated, nurtured and consolidated support for the ANC. This was a

difficult and uphill task that the chapter illustrates with examples from the ANC's experiences in Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique (pp. 48-49). The ANC faced other challenges, notably contradictions spawned by schisms, factions, that were due to various contending ideological, ethno-regional, racial and intellectual tendencies within it. The contradictions spewed by the schisms within the ANC were manifested, for example, in the antagonisms between its home-based military or armed wing and its political wing; between the petit-bourgeois, social democratic and Marxist ideological tendencies within it; and in policy and strategic differences over whether to negotiate with the racist white regime to bring about the end to its rule; and over welding together the sometimes uneasy rainbow coalition (Black, Coloured, Indian and White) within the ANC. The author further elaborates and explains how the contradictions played out and their effects in the fourth chapter.

As he ascended the greasy pole to power, Mbeki, as the book (pp. 62-69) shows so well, fought many battles, winning some, losing others. But the underlying problem revolved partly around the combination of the contradictions and the resentment against him recounted earlier in Chapter 2 of the book, and which, for example, pitted him against Chris Hani in the race for the deputy presidency of the ANC in 1991.

The fourth chapter mainly examines the domestic policy of Thabo Mbeki during his tenure as President of the Republic of South Africa. The discussion is framed around the personality, leadership style, and political philosophy of Mbeki, the fractious ideological and ethno-regional and racial tendencies within the ANC, and the structural character of the inherited political economy of post-apartheid South Africa in a globalizing world. The picture that emerges is a mixed one, showing how the pull and push factors, the dynamics of domestic and external social forces constituted constraints, limiting the terrain of domestic public policy choices available to Mbeki.

We read in the chapter the complex relationship between Mandela and Mbeki that gravitated around their different leadership styles, or perceptions of them (pp. 71-72). The chapter also provides an interesting analysis of the gloomy and dire socio-economic profile of South Africa under Mbeki. It weaves the analysis around the rancorous debate within the ANC and between it and its allies, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU),



over the substance and strategic direction of the underlying vision of 'national democratic revolution' that the ANC held out for post-apartheid South Africa. Noteworthy in this respect is the chapter's account of the division caused by the replacement of the 'redistributive state-led Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)' policy by the 'neo-liberal, market-led Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy'; and the implementation, and seeming failure of the Black Economic Empowerment policy (pp. 90-99). The analysis also traces the policy failures of the Mbeki Presidency to President Mbeki's leadership style, casting him in the mould of a 'Leninist czar,' 'an imperial president,' 'a micro-manager and workaholic' and 'a Machiavellian,' who pursues and practices 'a top-down, technocratic approach by an elite vanguard within a party led by intellectuals' (p. 94).

The fifth chapter provides a succinct but masterful and critical account of the foreign policy of South Africa under President Mbeki. The high-point of this policy, which the author, quoting Ali Mazrui, also regards as President Mbeki's legacy is, '...the re-globalisation of Pan-Africanism' (p. 144), or what the author also describes as '...the pan-African outlook and diasporic reach' (p. 119) of the policy. Anchoring the policy, according to the author, is President Mbeki's 'vision of an African Renaissance, which, as well as encouraging South Africans to embrace an African identity, sought to promote the continent's political, economic and social renewal, and the reintegration of Africa into the global economy' (p. 113).

Set against its characterization of this vision, the chapter enumerates the 'five key priorities for South Africa's external relations' under President Thabo Mbeki as: restructuring the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC); reforming regional and international organizations, such as the UN, the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF; hosting major international conferences; promoting peace and security in Africa and the Middle East; and fostering ties with the G-8 while devising a global South strategy (p. 112).

The enumeration is illustrated with summary accounts of specific foreign policy initiatives in some of the priority areas. Regarding peace and security in Africa, the chapter points to President Mbeki's peace efforts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (pp. 139-

142), in Zimbabwe (pp. 134-138), and his role as 'AU mediator...in negotiations to restore constitutional rule to Cote d'Ivoire' (pp. 127-128, 132-133). No less important, according to the author, is the fact that President Mbeki played a major role in the building of the institutions of the African Union, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), the Pan-African Parliament, and towards '...increasing Africa's leverage in institutions of global governance such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund' (p. 111).

The chapter's account of Nigerian-South African relations (pp. 122-134, 143-144), teased out around the personal, sometimes acrimonious, sometimes stormy, relations between President Mbeki and President Obasanjo (e.g. pp. 124-134), and the presumed hegemonic rivalry between both countries, is interesting in explicating the personality and national interest factors in driving and shaping international relations. The author argues that a cardinal dimension of South Africa's policy towards Nigeria during the Mbeki's presidency was Mbeki's perception that '...a strategic partnership with Nigeria was crucial to his vision of an African Renaissance' (p. 122). The author further observes that '...it was the Mbeki-Obasanjo era that remained the 'golden age' of Africa's most strategic relationship' (p. 134). To the author, the relationship is '...a marriage of necessity for Mbeki. Unable to assert leadership effectively in southern Africa because of residual historical problems, and facing rivalry from states like Angola and Zimbabwe that saw themselves as aspiring regional leaders, he almost seemed to be venturing outside his own sub-region in search of viable allies and additional legitimacy to bolster his continental leadership ambitions.'

However, given the size of Nigeria's economy and its population, the potential economic gains of trade relations and the export of finance capital to Nigeria was not lost on South African companies and firms. As the author notes, 'it was MTN's success (in Nigeria) that convinced many other South African firms that Nigeria was worth investing in' (p. 130). The resulting deluge of South African private sector investment created a hugely disproportionate trade imbalance between the two countries in favour of South Africa. The trade between the two countries was 'worth R45 billion by 2015' (p. 129), having increased from

R17 billion by 2008, leaving 'many Nigerians resentful...arguing that the South African market remained closed to Nigerian companies...' (p. 130).

The asymmetrical structure of Nigerian-South African relations, especially their trade relations, is replicated in South African trade relations with several other African countries, so much so that '...by 2000 South Africa had become the largest single foreign investor in the rest of Africa ... [and] by 2002 the rest of Africa accounted for 16.74 per cent of South African exports, while imports to South Africa from the rest of Africa amounted to an anaemic 3.62 per cent' (pp. 117-118). As the chapter points out, the trade imbalance elicited 'unease about ...South Africa's xenophobic and mercantilist trade policies under Mbeki's rule' (p. 115), including 'complaint about the aggressive drive by South Africa's mostly white-dominated corporations in search of new markets north of the Limpopo' (p. 116). But the chapter qualifies this complaint by pointing out that, 'the criticisms should be balanced against the creation of jobs and improvement in infrastructure and services in these countries' (p. 117).

What does all this suggest about the vision of African Renaissance that anchored President Mbeki's domestic and foreign policy? On the positive side, the chapter points to two initiatives to illustrate the 'pan-African and diasporic reach' of the policy (pp. 118-122). The first was South Africa's establishment in 2000 of 'a \$30 million African Renaissance and International Cooperation Fund to promote democracy, development and security in Africa.' The second, initiated in 2005, was to ensure that South African firms assisted the broad-based African Economic Empowerment (AEE), through strategic partnerships that promoted economic development in African countries.

On the less positive side, the chapter points to parallels drawn among several Southern African countries between the foreign policy goals of apartheid South Africa and those of Mbeki. In this respect, the chapter argues that, 'the xenophobic attacks in 2006 ("against foreigners from other African countries" living in South Africa) represented the smouldering ashes of Mbeki's African Renaissance project.'

The sixth chapter is about Mbeki's life after his presidency. It recounts his transition from a philosopher-king to an international statesman and mediator, involved in peacemaking efforts, and in investigating illicit

financial flows from Africa. It points to his role as a public intellectual speaking the truth to power on 'major foreign policy – and, increasingly, domestic South African – issues,' such as: the scourge of corruption and dictatorship in Africa; the alarming 'brain drain' that was robbing the continent of trained professionals; the need to strengthen African civil society; the stalled implementation of NEPAD; Western fears of China's growing economic presence in Africa; the heavy-handed imposition of unequal trade agreements on Africa by the industrialized countries; the increased deployment of US troops on the continent; the heroic deeds of young revolutionaries of the Afro-Arab Spring of 2011' (p. 153), among other issues. He also became patron of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation, established in 2010 to promote the African Renaissance, and of the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute, founded 'with the twin goals of training African youths on the political, economic and social renewal of their continent ... and creating new African thought leaders' (p. 152). Yet, as the chapter also points out, Mbeki was as culpable as some of the 'rent-seeking leaders' of the policy failures he is condemning out of office (p. 155).

The seventh chapter concludes that President Mbeki's legacy '... will inevitably be a mixed one' (p. 159). On the positive side, the chapter points to his socio-economic policies to 'lift millions out of dire poverty and social misery' (p. 159), his foreign policy in Africa and the diaspora (p. 161), and his 'self-confidence and proud assertion of an African identity' (p. 163). On the debit side, the chapter lists among 'the blot' on Mbeki's legacy the following: the 'AIDS debacle,' 'the controversial arms deal,' 'his monarchical leadership style' (p. 159) and '... South Africa's ("untransformed") deep socio-economic inequalities and injustices.' In view of this mixed record, the chapter compares the fate of Mbeki with another African philosopher-king, President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and ends with the puzzle, whether Mbeki 'will come to be viewed ... as a great pan-African but not a great South African.'

IV

To conclude this review of a brilliant and well-argued book, I want to reflect briefly, less in criticism and more to look at some of the larger issues about politics, especially about human nature in politics and the problem of democracy and development in Africa, on which I find the book to be a compelling and fascinating commentary.

First, is it not too soon to write a political biography of President Mbeki, less than ten years after he left office, no matter how tentative the biography is? But, 'why not write it now, anyway?' Is a meaningful counter-question to pose? This is because we are lucky that the book is not only about the place and relevance of ideas in politics but also an informed commentary, using the Mbeki presidency as a case study, on contemporary South African and, indeed, African politics.

Secondly, the book is fundamentally a study of the place of ideas in politics and the power and limits of the intellectual vocation in politics. The metaphor of the philosopher-king revolves around the driving power of knowledge, the responsibility that devolves from it on the intellectual, and with it the possibilities of envisioning, analyzing, understanding, ordering and directing politics as a public interest project. There is indeed a long tradition of black and African social and political thought, dating back to William Dubois, that articulates the imperative of the social responsibility and the political commitment of the black intellectual, the Talented Tenth, to use their knowledge to bring about the economic, political and socio-cultural transformation of their natal communities.

Yet, the perplexing problem is the nature of the knowledge so required: how and through what kind of preparation and training is it to be defined and acquired? How do we know it has been acquired?

And once acquired, how is it to be applied, and how exercised, given the complexities of human nature in politics? Why would the tenure in high public office of a 'philosopher-king' such as Mbeki, apparently so well-nurtured and prepared for high public office, as the book under review so well illustrates, be problematic and questionable? This is, at bottom, the ambiguity that envelopes the intellectual role in politics, so well illustrated by this fascinating book about the continuing political career of President Mbeki as a statesman. As the saying goes, 'knowledge is power.' For this reason, properly understood and utilized, knowledge must be the basis of public policy and we cannot do away with it by assuming an anti-intellectual posture.

Thirdly, the book, in its account of the division within the ANC over 'national democratic revolution' (pp. 91-98), raises in stark terms a problem posed for national liberation struggles in Africa, starting from Algeria, through Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe to South Africa: whether what Fanon describes as the two-phased strategy of socialist revolution, with a bourgeois revolution preceding but followed by a socialist revolution, was a structural necessity or a problem that should be avoided. The South African experience confirms the Fanonist fear that once the national petty bourgeoisie is allowed to consolidate power, it would betray the national democratic revolution.

Fourthly, the book touches upon two sets of trans-national vexing issues in the current debate about democracy and development in Africa. The first is the scourge of the imperial presidency, where the power of the presidency tends to be used arbitrarily, with impunity and in disregard of constitutional and countervailing restraints or limits in state and society on its exercise. The second is the deficit of human security across the African continent.

That the problem of the imperial presidency persists in several African countries after the recent wave of democratic transitions on the continent, and despite efforts to tame it through provisions for separation of powers moderated by checks and balances, is due more or less to the huge panoply of presidential power of appointment and patronage disbursement invested in presidents by national constitutions. As the fate of Mbeki also illustrates, strong countervailing expression of voice by social forces in both state and society, the occasional exercise of its oversight by the legislature and judiciary, and presidential term limits combine to serve from time to time to restrain the imperial presidency. This explains the paradox of an imperial president or constitutional monarch, such as Mbeki, who had no choice but to stick 'consistently to the rule of the democratic game' (p. 160).

The other trans-national issue is the structural one of poverty, unemployment, and social inequality that persists in spite of recent growth

in several African countries and the constitutional responsibility of public authorities, such as those stipulated under South Africa's Bill of Rights, to provide the social and economic facilities to enable their citizens enjoy human security under a democratic developmental state. It is in this context that one would have also expected some specific discussion in the book of the Land Question, which is one of human security issues in South Africa under the Mbeki presidency, for the question remains, from some accounts, a landmine ready to explode, if not addressed and resolved urgently and proactively in the country.

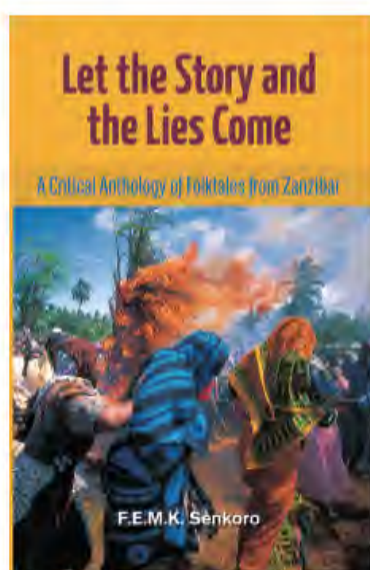
Finally, what are the prospects for Pan-Africanism, as fundamental as the book makes clear in several pages, that it will remain a signature imprint of President Mbeki's political career and the legacy of his presidency? Briefly put, we need to theorize Pan-Africanism or the African Renaissance as a social and political field of action, distinguishing between it as an idea or theory and as practice or movement. Such a distinction has profound implications for the possibilities and limits or feasibility of current proposals for a United States of Africa and the African Union – implications that include the contradictions thrown up by a resilient state-centric fascination with sovereignty, despite its progressive weakening, and by regional sensitivities, exhibited by the Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

Correction

In the September issue of *Africa Review of Books* (Vol. 11, No. 2), the bios of Anis Chowdhury and Jomo Kwame Sundaram who jointly wrote 'A Rejoinder to Lansana Keita's Reply' are corrected as follows:

ANIS CHOWDHURY, prior to joining the United Nations, was Professor of Economics at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, and founding managing editor of the *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*. He has published extensively on macroeconomic and development issues, including industrial restructuring and human development.

JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM was Assistant Director General, Food and Agriculture Organization from August 2012 until the end of 2015. He was Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations for Economic Development from January 2005 until June 2012. He has authored and edited over a hundred books and translated 12 volumes besides writing many academic papers and articles for the media.



Let the Story and the Lies Come A Critical Anthology of Folktales from Zanzibar

F.E.M.K. Senkoro

Despite the fact that Kiswahili is a lingua franca of the East African region, the scarcity of criticism of Kiswahili indigenous literary forms in general and the dearth of literary analyses of Zanzibar's rich oral tradition in particular, are very telling. Scholarly forays in the area are dismally few and far between. The critical silence with regard to this tradition is unwarranted, inexcusable, and inexplicable. In providing us with this critical anthology, Senkoro's intervention in *Let the Story and the Lies Come* is, therefore, at once corrective, refreshing and timely, filling as it does the gap in scholarly enterprises preoccupied with decoding the form and content of Zanzibari folktales. The anthology's approach allows the reader to go through the folktales in their original standard guise before subjecting them to critical analysis and appreciation. The tales can thus be used in a versatile manner. Moreover, that the folktales are contextualized within the wider taxonomy of Zanzibari oral literature makes it possible to study them in their own right or in relation to other genres. The anthology's subject-matter and the accompanying folktales are important to students, scholars and general readers of oral literature, folklore, children's literature, and comparative literature.

ISBN: 978-86978-703-2

Pages: 252