

**Opoku Agyeman: *Pan Africanism And Its Detractors: A Response to Harvard's Race Effacing Universalists.***  
Lewis, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1998. pp. 140.

This is a well researched book with more than 350 endnotes. Clearly, the book is a response to the dogmas, claims, and assumptions of a specific group of intellectuals, its personal experiences, and its historical and cultural thoughts. It deals with an ongoing debate on a topic that is intellectually provocative, historically multi-dimensional, as well as politically, and philosophically controversial. The author examines Pan-Africanism and the nature of the arguments of those who oppose its definition and assumptions, focusing in the main on the views of Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book, *In My Father's House*, and his associates, including William Wilson. At the centre of this debate are Appiah's views of Pan-Africanism, defined as cultural universalism, versus Agyeman's notion of Pan-Africanism as the total cultural and historical experiences of the African people accumulated in the course of their struggle to redefine their identity.

Agyeman begins his analysis with a definition of Pan-Africanism as the belief that African people, wherever they are belong to an African Nation. Using historical and philosophical sources, he discusses why and how Pan-Africanist thinkers like Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba were victimised for their commitment to the cause of Pan-Africanism (p. 3). One of the first important questions that the author poses is: What is behind the fear of Pan-Africanism that is translated into such ferocious opposition to it? The author examines the relevant historical and economic conditions to locate his *problematique*, and finds the answers to it in his examination of the nature of the relationship between power and labour. He argues that without the slave labour of millions of Africans who were uprooted from Africa some 365 years ago the capitalist society of the Americas would not have been created (p. 4).

He argues therefore "that power consolidation in Africa would compel a reallocation of global resources, as well as unleashing a fiercer psychological energy and political assertion among Diaspora Africans that would unsettle the social and political (power) structures of many a polity in the Americas, from Cuba through Brazil to the United States" (p. 4). Cultural universalists like Appiah and

his collaborators, Agyeman asserts, are opposed to the cultural and historical specificity of Africa and its peoples. Hence he (Appiah) would define himself as a child of two worlds, dismissing race and ethnicity, including even the Asante cultural institutions in which his "*Father's House*" is supposedly embedded (p. 6).

An important part of this assessment leads Agyeman to ask the question: What is universalism? He responds to this question with Appiah's personal experience as a mulatto who claims that his mother's people – her cousins and grand parents related to him in a decent, humane way (p. 7). Even so, he argues, Appiah put a premium on his Europeanness and despised his Africanness (p. 8) Agyeman argues that Appiah's conception of universalism is a concealed appeal for miscegenation or genetic exchange (p. 8). Referring briefly to Fernando Henriques' exposition on the Cuban experience for purposes of comparison, Agyeman points out that Appiah sees his values in terms of human spirit and a cultural synthesis of a "middle way" between "endogenous tradition in Africa and exogenous Western ideas" (p. 9).

For Agyeman, one of the problems of the universalist argument is that it is unashamedly racist in essence. Its apologists appropriate African culture as Elvis Presley did (p. 13) and sever its content from its history. Another case of intellectual appropriation is jazz in the U.S., "the only musical art form to which the U.S. can lay exclusive (ownership)" (p. 12).

Agyeman argues that the attacks against Pan-Africanism are coming at a time when the need for regional integration as development strategy is urgent; and also at time when the identification of African Americans with Africa is growing. And curiously, the new wave of assaults on Pan-Africanism is spearheaded by "black" scholars in a number of so-called prestigious American universities. For example, in his determination to belittle the salience of race as a critical factor for understanding the social conditions of African Americans, William Wilson ignores the overwhelming evidence to the contrary and argues that the barriers to advancement of black people in the U.S. in the latter half of the 20th century are rooted no longer in racism but in basic structural shifts in the U.S. economy (p. 25). Agyeman dismisses such scholars and their collaborators like Lerone Bennett (1965) and Hilary Silver (1995), among others, arguing that blacks are kept down the social ladder not because they do not have an education, but because they are blacks (pp. 28-29). The processes of job retention and structurally low wages, for instance, reflect racism.

Agyeman insists that within the Pan-Africanist movement is Afro-centrism, the scholastic movement that seeks to confer proper recognition of the African experience in world history by rectifying the distortions, downright falsehoods, and deliberate omissions that characterise European "scholarship" (p. 39). This movement has also become the subject of attacks by scholars of European

rationality who continue to insist that Africans have no history, and that they are of an inferior race (pp. 41-42). Gates, another member of the "eminent breed" contends that Afro-centric scholarship is "bogus" because it is essentially about inventing an African past that never was (p. 42). Ayittey, who seemingly aspires to join the ranks of the "eminent breed" of European thinkers by labouring assiduously in the field of African *mea culpa*, writes about exaggerated claims about Africa. Ignoring conclusive historical and scientific evidence in the works of Herodotus of the fifth cent B.C., Sheikh Anta Diop, Basil Davidson, and Bruce Williams (to cite only a few), concerning the advanced civilisations that Africans produced before European civilisation hit the world stage, Ayittey concludes that Egyptian society was Arabic (p. 43). Agyeman challenges such Euro-centric scholars and asks why the triangle of Nubian-Ethiopian-Egyptian civilisation, the epicenter of antiquity, should be excluded from the curriculum of classics departments.

In the same vein, Agyeman criticises the attitude which, for example, marginalised Harvard University's Department of Afro-American Studies. For instance, when there were in the 1970s at least six departments with some one hundred professors teaching the various languages and literature of Europe alone, African languages and literature were not taught at Harvard (p. 56). Courses taught in the Department of History were, in essence, about the history of the Arabs and the Europeans in Africa, or taken with topics of the likes of "Alcohol in Sub-Sahara Africa, 1850 to the present" (p. 57).

In Agyeman's view, Appiah's book is full of logical and historical contradictions. For example, while Appiah recognised that "culture" and "civilisations" are real, he denies that has Africa a connected culture. Agyeman points out that throughout his book – *In My Father's House* – Appiah demonstrates a determination to employ illogicalities to rationalise absurdities in the service of anti-Pan-Africanism (p. 76). While he (Appiah) believes that the only Pan-Africanism that has legitimacy is one without race, at the same time, he acknowledges that Pan-Africanism is black solidarity (p. 77); and that there is no American culture without its African roots (p. 79).

Agyeman also states that Appiah "displays throughout his book a perplexing incapacity to grasp the core reality of powerlessness that hobbles Africa and its people" (p. 91). In a world of *realpolitik* what should Africans do to reconstruct themselves? Here, the universal cultural movement is the vanguard force. Although the argument in this book does not have anything to do with a political case for African empowerment, Appiah maintains that it is in the political sphere that issues should be raised. Yet, his knowledge about politics is next to nothing (p. 91).

Indeed, Agyeman raises fundamental issues concerning the origin of underdevelopment, political instability, social misery, and the cultural identity of African people the world over. It revives and advances the debate on Pan-Africanism that

apologists of Western imperialism like Fukuyama would want to see buried for good. The book makes a major contribution to the Pan-Africanist struggle, and deserves the closest attention of all Pan-Africanists

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