Book Review Essay


Published in a very colorful edition, Ohio Short Histories of Africa: African Activists of the Twentieth Century is made up of a compendium of four very useful biographical books, which discuss the very exciting and intellectually stimulating lives of four African nationalists in the contexts of their respective spectacular activist exploits: Chris Hani (South Africa); Wangari Muta Maathai (Kenya); Josie Mpama/Palmer (South Africa); and Ken Saro-Wiwa (Nigeria). The biographers of the combined publications are Hugh Macmillan as well as Tabitha Kanogo, Robert R. Edgar, Roy Doron, and Toyin Falola.

The first biography details the radical life of South Africa-born Chris Hani (1942–1993). Born on June 28, 1942, he was shot to death on April 10, 1993, outside his home in South Africa’s Dawn Park, which is a suburb of Boksburg, not far from the major city of Johannesburg. Then South African President F.W. de Klerk, in a broadcast, asked for peace to have the immigrant assassin arrested to bring him to justice. Although Mr. Mandela was not yet the President of South Africa, his televised words for calm were also respected. What seemed remarkable was the fact that it was a white woman (an Afrikaner), who provided information about the suspected white assassin for him to be arrested and brought to justice.

Readers are to learn from Hani’s biography that his death sparked changes in then Apartheid South Africa. As future President Cyril Ramaphosa disclosed in the book, in a meeting of black leaders later in April of 1993 with then President De Klerk, the indomitable Mr. Mandela demanded democratic elections; subsequently, a new, transitional, constitution was introduced and, on
April 27, 1994, democratic elections were held. That date, as pointed out in the biography, in fact “marked the formal end of Apartheid,” (p. 10). Since the ANC won the first democratic polls, its leader (Mr. Nelson Mandela) was eventually sworn-in to become the new President of democratic South Africa.

Apart from the introduction, 51-year old Hani’s biography has eight chapters; a postscript as well as acknowledgments; a bibliography and, an index. From it, readers will learn a lot about his very exemplary activist life.

The second biography in the book is that of Kenyan-born 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Muta Maathai (1940–2011). University of California-Berkeley History Professor Tabitha Kanongo is the author of the Kenyan environmental activist’s biography. The 8-page introduction is sub-titled, “Wangari Maathai, a Global Icon.” Apart from the very moving introduction, the Maathai biography includes five mainstream chapters, acknowledgments; abbreviations; conclusion; notes; selected bibliography; and an index.

Born in 1940, Dr. Maathai died on Sunday, September 25, 2011, of complications arising from ovarian cancer, aged 71 years old. World leaders, diplomats as well as men and women from all walks of life expressed words of condolences. To the surprise of many, as an environmentalist, she did not want to be buried in a casket that would rot and pollute the earth. Therefore, she opted for cremation, which shocked his immediate family and admirers. However, her very close friend and Green Belt Movement (GBM) Treasurer (Professor Vertisine Mbaya) did confirm that “Maathai was one of those who did say that we better think of something else besides cutting down trees for caskets,” (p. 162).

Indeed, Dr. Maathai’s distinguished life can be emulated by the younger generation upon perusing both her earlier autobiography and the biography in Ohio Short Histories of Africa: African Activists of the Twentieth Century.

The third biography in the series is about South Africa’s Josie Mpama/Palmer (1903–1979) authored by Robert R. Edgar. Her famous words – which summed up her life – were: “We women are the backbone of the nation,” (p. 2). Those famous words enriched her political activism. The Mpama/Palmer biography is made up of six chapters, with a conclusion, as well as the list of illustrations; a preface; acknowledgments; an introduction, with the sub-title of “An Untidy Hero”; an appendix; interviews; bibliography; and an index.

Readers of the biography should certainly be influenced by the rich activist background of Mpama/Palmer, a mother of four, whose double surname is explained in “A Note on the Names Mpama and Palmer”, (p. 13). Like her fellow black people of Apartheid South Africa, she suffered in varied ways under the repressive white minority (or Apartheid) regime. Her biographer
confirms it, as she inter alia wrote: “A new chapter opened in Josie’s life when the Afrikaner-led Nationalist Party took power in 1948 with the goal of introducing apartheid, a comprehensive program that sought to engineer profound changes in the social, political, and economic order regardless of their consequences,” (p. 135).

The appendix of the biography is made up of radical sayings of Mpama/Palmer, including a thoughtful letter to an editor. As the daughter of a black father and a mother of mixed race, as the biographer pointed out, “she transgressed rigid racial identification in her personal and political lives,” (p. 168). She died in 1979 “as the apartheid system was entering its last phase,” (p. 171).

The fourth biography in the volume is about Nigeria-born Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941–1995), which was co-authored by Winston-Salem State University History Professor Roy Doron and University of Texas-Austin Distinguished History Professor and the Jacob and Frances Sanger Mossiker Humanities’ Chair Toyin Falola (who holds several honorary doctoral degrees). Ken Saro-Wiwa died a brutal death of public hanging by the Abacha military regime in 1995 for his political activism in Nigeria’s oil-rich Delta region. His biography is made up of a list of illustrations; a preface; an introduction; eight chapters; notes; a bibliography; and an index.

It is very significant that the co-authors have pointed out the fact that Ken Saro-Wiwa was not only a political activist; additionally, he was a very well-known intellectual, who published several books, including children’s books. Also, he left behind a large volume of publishable documents. Sadly, he met his brutal death on November 10, 1995, together with his other Ogoni compatriots and, in the co-authors’ words, “he left an indelible mark on the life of Nigeria,” (p. 146). General Sani Abacha (1943–1998), whose military regime publicly hanged Ken Saro-Wiwa, had seized political power in 1993 through the barrel of the gun; on June 8, 1998, barely three years after the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his Ogoni compatriots by his regime, he also died mysteriously.

Ohio University Press’ Short Histories of Africa Series

Ohio Short Histories of Africa: African Activists of the Twentieth Century has been produced as part of the series. An earlier volume in the series is Ohio Short Histories of Africa: African Leaders of the Twentieth Century (2015). Students as well as campus professors and the general reader are expected to benefit
tremendously from the series. The books of the series should be very suitable for classroom use on university campuses.

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