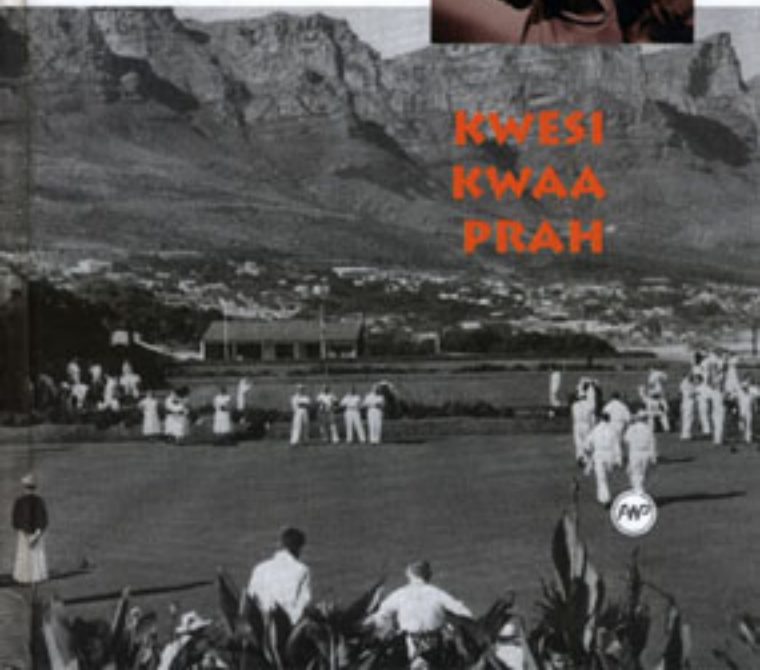


BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

PAN-AFRICANIST
DISPUTATIONS, SELECTED
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Ras Makonnen: True Pan-Africanist

An Appreciation: The Weekly Review (Nairobi), January 6th, 1984.

On December 18, 1983, Dr. T.R. Makonnen, an old pan-Africanist front-liner, died peacefully in his house in Nairobi West while being attended to by his two sons, Lorenzo and Menelik. His death brought to a close the struggles of a man who throughout his lifetime worked tirelessly at the expense of his own family life, with other like-minded people, to see that the national aspirations for independence and unity of black people in Africa and the Diaspora could be achieved.

T.R. Makonnen (nee Griffith) was born in Buxton, Guyana, at the beginning of this century, at a time when the aura of bondage and servitude still hung heavily over the blackman. After going through primary and secondary school in Guyana, Makonnen was for a period involved with his father and cousin, David Talbot, in diamond mining. It was at this time that he came under the influence of the ideas of Marcus Garvey.

In 1927, Makonnen went to Texas to study mineralogy. Soon after his arrival he was drawn into YMCA activities through which he made his first important contacts with black people from Africa and laid the foundation for his reputation as a singularly gifted speaker. Makonnen was actively engaged in the raging debates of those days on the comparative merits of the views of Du Bois and Garvey. His collaboration with George Padmore, then Malcolm Nurse, a nephew of Sylvester Williams, also dates from this period.

In 1933, Makonnen moved to Cornell University where he continued his activities as a champion of the cause of black people. He learnt from men like the economist, Scott-Nearing, and the anthropologist, Franz Boas. His brief flirtation with the radical American left during these years, drew in his own words, jocular remarks from the Nigerian, Azikiwe, and the Ugandan, Kalibala, who were also in America at the time. A good number of his generation got their early political education from associations on the left of the political spectrum.

It was at about the time that Mussolini unravelled his designs on Ethiopia that the young Guyanan changed his name to Makonnen in order to emphasise his Ethiopian preoccupations. Together with Makonnen Desta, Peter Mbiyu Koinange, Workineh Martin and others, T.R. Makonnen worked to publicise the Ethiopian crisis to sympathetic ears. Indeed, it was partly because of the lack of information on the Ethiopian crisis that Makonnen moved to Europe in 1935, ostensibly to pursue veterinary studies in Denmark. It was on his first brief visit to London - en route to Denmark - that he met and shared a platform with C.L.R. James and Jomo Kenyatta at a meeting in Trafalgar Square on the Ethiopian crisis, organised by the International African Friends of Ethiopia (IAFE).

For political reasons and circumstances surrounding his protestations in Denmark about the Ethiopian question, Makonnen was, after a sojourn of two years, deported to Britain. On the boat, he met Paul Robeson who had then left America and was establishing a name for himself at the Unity Theatre in London. Their meeting opened up possibilities of collaboration in efforts towards the achievement of black freedom.

When Haile Selassie went into exile in Britain, Makonnen, Kenyatta, Wallace-Johnson and others organised a group to welcome him.

At the outbreak of the second world war, Makonnen, helped by Peter Milliard, moved from London to Manchester, where he successfully established a chain of restaurants. The profits from his efforts were largely pushed into their Pan-Africanist schemes. Perhaps the most historically significant of these efforts was the Fifth Manchester Pan-African Congress and the allied Pan-African Federation Press. His association with Nkrumah (Ghana), Peter Abrahams (South Africa) Fadipe (Nigeria) and Du Bois developed during this period. During the post-war years, Makonnen worked with members of the Somali Youth League in Britain to improve Somali-Ethiopian relations.

Makonnen was one of the last people to see Kenyatta before he left Britain to return to Kenya. Indeed, years later when Kenyatta's arrest was imminent, Makonnen was questioned in Britain by the MI-5 about

his contacts with Kenyatta. His political contacts and activities at this time also included work with the Sudanese Umma, and in particular with men like Abdalla Khalil Bey and Mohammed Mahjoub.

The struggle for independence in Africa emerged in earnest during the 1950s. When, in 1956, independence came within reach in Ghana, after a preliminary visit, Makonnen went to settle there. Initially, he worked with Padmore as an adviser on African affairs, subsequently moving to the newly-established African Affairs Centre as director. It was in this latter capacity in the late 50s that he came into contact with Kaunda, Lumumba, Roberto, Nkomo, Banda and other leaders of African opinion. As he used to say to Nkrumah: "I am at your beck and call. If you want me to go to Central Africa, or to go to Nyerere or Obote to take the message, then let me go. That's my job".

Makonnen played a crucial role in the establishment of the OAU. After the February, 1966, coup in Ghana, he was imprisoned in Ussher Fort, Accra, for nine months, after which he was released by the Ankrah regime through the good offices of Kenyatta. He came to Kenya in 1966 and served as an adviser in the Ministry of Tourism, becoming a Kenyan citizen in 1969. In Kenya, Makonnen established what he had conceived to be an African cultural holiday village in Mombasa (at *Shimo la Tewa*) and continued to be a generous friend and father to African freedom fighters, African Americans and West Indians. Particularly noticeable, in my view, has been the succour and comfort he provided to South African refugees in Nairobi. In this respect, I would want to remember Sefako Mukoka and most importantly Jessica Okondo. Jessica was one of the closest people to Makonnen in his late years.

In his final years, Makonnen became increasingly perturbed with the general results of independence. African unity remained elusive. Too often, he felt excessive materialism, pomp and circumstance, had become overriding preoccupations of independent Africa.

Makonnen is one of the last of his generation to pass away and the younger generation would do well to learn from his ideals, dedication and struggle.