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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

Molefi K. Asante & Abu S. Abarry (Eds.) *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 1996. 828p. \$29.95 paper.

Upon first approaching the text it is quite intimidating. The book is a mammoth of text containing over 826 pages of information. When one begins to look at the table of content anxiety level can be further increased. There are names of familiar and less familiar African scholars. A person not knowing the profound impact that Africans have made on the world through written form would find themselves in disbelief that this book is about African scholarship. This is to the credit of the authors. Asante and Abarry were able to further demonstrate their scholarly abilities by compiling African literary genius dating back to the Kemetite dynasty. Reading the preface and introduction can put one's anxiety at ease. The authors share with the readers the basic philosophy of the book. They state that "humans have created signs and symbols on the continent [of Africa] longer than anywhere else on the earth." This opening statement of the preface can be so empowering to the uninitiated that s/he would want to read the text with the intent of uncovering the ancient genius that has been concealed about Africans. The energy that is drawn from this sentence alone causes the reader to want to search the pages of the text to have some new information to discuss with their colleagues if not just simply to add to their knowledge base. The authors state that their basic premise was to compile the works of both continental and Diaspora Africans that would serve as a foundation for study and reflection of the African genius. An opening statement such as the one just mentioned is enough to do that; the rest of the text becomes a modality for further study and reflection.

Sankofa or return to the source is the theme of the introduction. *Sankofa* is an Akan concept meaning it is not a taboo to go back and fetch what is lost. The Akan use various symbols to represent *Sankofa*. The symbols are simply a series of many *Adinkra* symbols used by the Akan of West Africa. The *Sankofa* symbol appears on the cover of the book indicating that the entire book is about returning to the past rhetorical brilliance of African people to regain their direction. The book uses different *adinkra* symbols for each chapter. On the initial page of each chapter (or part) is an *Adinkra* symbol. On the back of each initial page the *Adinkra* symbol is explained. This is an extremely educational tool utilized by Asante and Abarry. Utilizing the *Adinkra* symbols exposes one to the symbols of the African ancestors as well as puts the reader into the overall theme of that particular chapter or part of the book. Also, it forces the reader to actually go back and reclaim their African genius as they attempt to move forward to gain knowledge of the *African intellectual heritage*.

Each section of the book covers very relevant topics that unmask the true African genius. Part one is entitled *The Creation of the Universe*. This section of the book covers African peoples such as the Kemetians, Dogons, Akans, Yorubas, and African Americans,

as well as the explanation of how the world came to be. Each narrative explains the concept of God, God's place in the universe and human relationship to God. Each story is profound. Part two explains *Religious Ideas*. In this, the theological concepts that evolved as a result of the basic explanation of how we come into being are analyzed. *Culture and Identity* is the title of part three, which reveals the African genius in a practical sense. One is able to see how diverse African people established systems of values, beliefs, and orientations towards the living and the dead. In part four, *Philosophy and Morality*, the reader is provided with the opportunity to see how Africans have reflected on the nature of their existence and justified systems of ethics and human conduct within the universe. This section demonstrates that Africans have engaged in the inquiry of human existence for centuries. Part five is entitled *Society and Politics*. Writings from Weni of the 6th Dynasty of Kemet to Cornel West of the 20th century are presented. This section talks about the organized action of African people throughout the ages. It does an effective job of *Sankofa* by showing that Africans can and do unite for a common cause of liberation and elevation. In line with the theme of the African unity is *Resistance and Renewal*, the title of the 6th part of the book. Unlike other sections, this section highlights the power of African people to unify and defeat a common oppressor. It shows how Africans have been able to fight and win against injustice, immorality, domination, and colonialism. The power of this section is that it discusses the topic of African resistance that is rarely ever mentioned in most scholarly discourse. Asante and Abarry elucidate not only the struggle for African liberation, but additionally, they disclose the purpose of the struggle for liberation which is to be all that the God has ordained Africans to do. Liberators such as Ah-mose and Thuthmose of Kemet, Nat Turner and Ida B. Wells-Barnett of the United States, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and Awa Thiam of Mali are highlighted in this section. They all have one common aim: the reestablishment of African people to their original greatness. This is a wonderful concluding chapter to a profound book that is designed to cause one to think deeply about the African existence.

A major shortcoming of the book is that it does not explain fully, to the uninitiated, the various concepts and the context out which the concepts and personalities evolve. It would have been helpful for the authors to explain more about the cosmogony of the Kemetians, the Yorubas, or the Akans before introducing the creation stories of these societies. An explanation of the *Adinkra* symbols would have facilitated the discussion of the Akan cosmogony, ontology, and axiology. Doing this could have enhanced the reader's understanding of the concepts that were introduced. Lack of basic information about the topics of discussion can leave the first time reader in a miasma of confusion. The authors should take more caution with the next volume to explain African concepts and systems of thought to students new to the study of African greatness.

Additionally, the authors are encouraged to elevate more women who have helped to shape our intellectual heritage. The inclusion of women such as Queen Hatshepsut, Mary M. Bethune, Ida B. Well-Barnett, and Awa Thiam was enlightening, however there are

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certainly more profound sisters such as Yaa Asantewa, Queen Nzinga, Ifi Amadiume, Clenora Hudson-Weems, Iyanla Vanzant, Ama Ata Aidoo, Marimba Ani, and Irene Assba d'Almeida. In African tradition the voice of the women have been central to the elevation of African people.

Overall, the book is informative and inspiring. The topics discussed indeed caused me to reflect on the greatness of African people and it served to encourage me to radiate with the brilliance of my Africaness. It is a powerful book of sources into the greatness that is African.

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