

**Book Review: Bonacci, G., Delmas, A., & Argyriadis, K's. (Eds.), (2020) *Cuba and Africa, 1959-1994: Writing an alternative Atlantic history* Hard Cover \$25.26 (List price on Amazon)**

Yonas Ashine\*

*Cuba and Africa 1959-1994: Writing an alternative Atlantic History* is an edited book that presents an alternative history of the Atlantic world written from many places where Cuban internationalism left its legacy. The book narrates the history of internationalism and the Atlantic world as told from Africa mainly from South Africa, Algeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Congo; as well as from different parts of America such as Brazil, the United States, and the Caribbean mainly from Cuba. *Cuba and Africa* appear a truly alternative history of the Atlantic world anchoring on everyday life produced under the sky of global solidarity that Cuban internationalism authored. In the words of the editors, the history of Cuban internationalism is also a "...story of tens of thousands of individuals who crossed the Atlantic, from one side to the other, as doctors, scientists, soldiers, students, religious leaders or artists [whose legacy is felt to date]." (p. 3). Therefore, *Cuba and Africa* is the history of trajectories these professionals whose life story appears an alternative history of the Atlantic. In the words of the editors this story is "in short, the history of the circulations of people, ideas, and representations" that can only be intelligible at local level (p. 3). This is a history of internationalism from below with neither centering nor disregarding the subjects of mainstream international relations: diplomatic arenas, military engagements, summits, international organizations, etc.

*Cuba and Africa* takes a chunk of history from 1959 to 1994 as an abbreviated time to locate these histories. It starts with the year 1959 that marks the Cuban revolution and also an intensification of national struggle in Africa followed by 1960 known as an African year of independence. The end of Apartheid in South Africa in 1994 is a historical moment that the authors convincingly used as another edge of the time frame of the book. This chunk of history is a long

---

\* Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, College of Social Sciences, Addis Ababa University, Email: [yoniashine2010@gmail.com](mailto:yoniashine2010@gmail.com), Tel.: +251911931538, P. O. Box: 1176 /Addis Ababa

history of struggle that brought Cubans and Africans together against colonialism, racialism, imperialism, and Apartheid. This politics of trans-Atlantic solidarity appears to be one of the sites where one can study a “history of peoples without history”, or explore the international relations from below, or from black diplomacy to use Christopher Clapham’s (1996) and Ali Mazuri’s (1977) descriptions respectively. It is a study of a retrospective study of international relations as seen from Africa anchoring the subaltern experiences, survival, struggles, destinies, and trajectories of Africans.

Despite being marked by abbreviated time from 1959-1994, *Cuba and Africa* are written in dis-abbreviated temporality and space, traversing local, regional, global and continental realms. This is a selected history of Cuba-Africa relations; however, it has also memory. The editors’ convincingly prefaced this history of half a century with four centuries of interaction archived in the memories of people of African descent in Cuba. The struggles and solidarities that were unfolded since the 1959 Cuban Revolution were not sudden ruptures and episodes without past connections, roots, and histories. These are things, which the editors call “old ties” because they survived interwoven through trade and practices of slavery for centuries. These histories were not a mere history of objects in the marketplace under trans-Atlantic slavery rather they are political and social histories marked by slave revolts, anti-slavery rebellions and solidarity of the oppressed coloured people of African and Asian descent. These struggles, rebellions, and solidarities are presented as antecedents of pan-Africanism, internationalism and anti-colonial solidarity that can be traced from slavery and colonialism. In addition to this continuity that can be intelligible through memory and history, the old ties are also marked by radical departure as the post-1959 history is a story of internationalism in which a political project of Cuban revolutionaries imagined. It is this internationalism that authored the new history of South-South cooperation where Africa holds a central place. This makes another dimension to the already claimed alternativeness of history these authors aspire to tell. This new or alternative history is not a mere Afrocentric history rather a history of internationalism, South-South cooperation, and the Atlantic seen from Africa and Cuba.

The book is divided into four themes : Politics and Solidarity, Trajectories, Voices and Reconstructing history, and reconnecting roots. There are chapters under each theme. The theme politics and solidarity comprises four chapters which fall within the boundaries of mainstream international relations both theoretically and methodologically. The authors deploy both state and individual

levels of analysis, to write the history of Cuba's relations with Algeria, Angola, Congo Brazzaville, and Equatorial Guinea.

The first chapter under this list began the discussion with an in-depth narration of the history and memory of Cuba and Algeria's reciprocal support during the war for liberation and decolonization of Algeria and during the 1962 Missile crisis. The author of this chapter, Emmanuel Alcaraz, views this bi-lateral relation as part of the tri-continental movement that connects Latin America, Africa, and Asia. It is in this dimension of South-South cooperation that Algeria played a historical role mainly in connecting Cuba with Africa. Algiers was both 'the world capital of revolutionaries' (p. 30) and Cuba's internationalism gateway back to Africa. Algiers hosted hundreds of revolutionaries from different parts of Africa. Combining the national history and the history of great revolutionaries such as Fidel Castro, Ahmed Ben Bella, Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Steve Biko, and Nelson Mandela, this chapter presents the place of Cuba-Algeria relation as the foundation of South-South cooperation and Cuba-Africa politics of solidarity. However, this study must be seen as part of mainstream international relations as it focused much on the history of diplomatic, military, and medical bilateral relations as seen from Algeria. Under this bilateral relation, there must be huge amount of life histories and networks of solidarity that might survive until today yet to be told.

Similar to the first chapter, the second one presents Cuba's internationalism in Congo-Brazzaville and Angola, 1963-1977. The authors, Héloïse Kiriakou and Bernardo J.C. André, are preoccupied with comparative analysis of Cuba's internationalism from the two states' context as an example of emerging Cuba's internationalism in the 60s and 70s. Congo is considered as the second gateway to Cuba's internationalism in Africa while Cuba's comprehensive involvement in Angola presented it as apex of this internationalism. The authors considered Cuba's involvement in its depth and width as well as discussed its peculiar and exceptional history as epitome of progressive internationalism. The third chapter discusses Cuba's exception in terms of perspective and method. The author, Delmas Tsafack, discusses the US' led Isolation of Cuba and Guinea's disagreement with former colonial state Spain as determining factors and motivation for both Cuba and Equatorial Guinea to engage in this exceptional bilateral relation. This bilateral relation is driven by the historic condition of both Cuba and Guinea presented convincingly in the article as a textbook case of south-south cooperation. In the fourth chapter Christine Hatzky explores Cuba's civil presence in Angola and her chapter can be read together with the second chapter to further enrich the the comparative analysis Kiriakou and André have employed.

The next two chapters (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>) falls under trajectories theme. The fourth chapter written from Angola and Pablo Rodriguez Ruiz discusses the Angola-Cuba relations from the academic site where Cuban and Angolan scholars formed a team to study Angola's National question. This was one of the rare domain of relations at least in terms of documented bilateral relations between Angola and Cuba that brought a multidisciplinary and multinational academic project to understand Angola's national question. The author who was a member of this academic theme insightfully documented the process of this collaborative research project with reference to the bilateral military relations between Cuba and Angola.

Written from Congo, the sixth chapter by Michel Luntumbue depicts another trajectory of non-linear and multi-dimensional terrain of bilateral relations. The author depicts the depth of Afro-Cuban relations that can be traced back to slave revolt and the gorilla and other emancipatory movements in the Caribbean to the Cuba-Africa revolutionary solidarity and its aftermath. The legacy of these historical trajectories of connections and solidarities produced communities, linked with "language, family ties and exchanges" (p. 131). The author narrates these legacies in their respective historicity mainly of Cuba's revolutionary mission at the heart of Africa. This chapter combined both the mainstream international relation focusing on the diplomatic interactions of states, and the transnational life histories and memories that crossed the Atlantic. This article exposes the presence of rich untold stories and subaltern memories of individuals and groups occurred simultaneously with Cuba-Africa political and diplomatic relations. Most of these stories are yet to be told mainly from places such as Angola and Ethiopia where Cuba's involvement was very profound.

The third theme "voices" comprises two chapters (7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup>) that present the solidarity of Cuba and Africa from cultural point of view. Chapter seven is entitled 'Atlantic Voices: imagination and sound dialogue between Congolese and Cuba singers in the 1950s'. In this chapter Charlotte Grabli depicts how the cultural grain is produced through cross-fertilization and reciprocal appropriation of languages, artists' names, clothing, and dance produced what the author calls the transatlantic "sound dialogue." This sound dialogue, the author argues, is a voice which "is materiality and musicality of human vocal sound" (p. 163), involving an imagined Afro-Cuban Community. This dialogue, the author insightfully documented, produced the lives of many musicians, songwriters, and bandleaders in the transnational space that connects Africa and Cuba. Their songs and reciprocal renaming from both sides created "symbolic possibilities of a transatlantic dialogue beyond the colonial situation". This popular transnational

dialogue that created Afro Cuban communities brought the issue of authenticity to the picture as dialogue inevitably enables cultural contact and exchange. This chapter insightfully combined anthropology, history, and transnational politics of memory, resistance, and solidarity, which is written by Elian Dejjbari, Chapter eight captured a similar musical dialogue between Cuba and West Africa between 1960-1970. Dejjbari situates the discussion in cold war international relations between Cuba and many African states mainly Mali and mobilized International Relations terms such as soft power, cultural diplomacy, etc. that enabled the exchange in the realm of music and sounds. This exchange created renewed old historical interactions and made it possible to produce alternative sites of cosmopolitan modernity produced through Afro-Cuban music, sound, and instrument. Dejjbari gazed at this history from international relations while Grabli presented to us from the cultural grain to bilateral solidarity. In so doing, Grabli documented both political and musical encounters, linkages, circulations, and exchanges that left its legacy. The authors depicted the multidirectional form of these relations transcending and disturbing linearity, temporality, and spatial origination. In so doing, they narrated the complex life of Afro-Cuban dialogue in the untold histories, memories, and expectations of the Atlantic world.

The fourth theme "reconstructing history, reconnecting roots" comprises two chapter (9 & 10). Chapter nine is about spiritual and ritual reconnection between Cuba and Africa. In this chapter the author, Kali Argyriads, explores the history and trajectories of reconnections in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution. The reconnections unfolded from an academic realm where folklore, anthropology, history, religion, music, and dance studies to the functional connections between religious leaders in Cuba, Brazil, and African Americans to Africa. The role of artistic and literary works appeared significant in this contour of reconnections. The ramifications of such reconnection have been complex, contentious and dynamic, authoring a deepening new history of the transatlantic world.

In the last chapter, the author João Felipe Gonçalves plausibly located the place of Africa in this complex relationship between Cubans and American Cubans. Here Africa appears as a space where the political struggle over Cuba has been reproduced at the same time it was also imagined as an authentic source to Cuban cultural roots. Deploying two concepts 'mirror making' and 'root searching' Gonçalves narrates the complex relations between Cubans in Miami and Africans mainly in Angola and Congo. However, the author depicts the relationship that goes beyond these two forms mainly documenting the performance of both Cubans and Cuba Americans, Gonçalves discuss how Africa was reproduced as a site of cosmopolitanism. In these complex relations, the

author depicted not only cultural and religious forms but also how racial markers played out in these interactions.

The book presents insightful histories and stories of the Atlantic world combining mainstream interaction of states and people across the Atlantic with stories, subjectivities and everyday life of individuals, families and professionals. The anthology is an interdisciplinary work but produced without losing the disciplinarity aspect mainly in the methodological design. It is a collection of excellent essays that make a good read to any person. The editors, Kali Argyriadis, Giulia Bonacci and Adrien Delmas succeeded in writing a new alternative history of the Atlantic without repeating and ignoring old stories and trajectories. I hope the book inspires other works that focus on life histories in the subaltern space but are connected and produced as part of Cuba-Africa international relations. As the subject of international relations and its history is dominantly written as a history of big powers marginalising Africa and other spaces of the global south, *Cuba and Africa*, depicts how one can transcend such silence and marginalisation. This book combined social, cultural and political relations to reveal new methodological insight mainly to mainstream international relations as seen from the Atlantic world. Moreover, given the global order is unfolding in a disorderly manner combining the features of the cold war and multipolarity, it is worth publishing such inspiring book on the history of solidarity of people of the global south in a difficult time. It may inspire new solidarity perhaps born out of a refashioned principle of non-alignment and south-south cooperation to face the new challenges of our time.

**Reference**

Clapham, Christopher. (1996). *Africa and the international system: The politics of state survival*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mazrui, Ali (1977). *Africa's international relations: The diplomacy of dependency and change*. London: Heinemann.