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ADEBAJO Adekeye. — *Thabo Mbeki*. Athens, Ohio University Press, 2016, 190 p., index.

- 1 For those who are old enough to remember, 1990 was the year that South African Prime Minister F. W. Klerk released Nelson Mandela from Robben Island, along with other ANC political prisoners like Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki. That last name may not be as familiar as the first. But Govan Mbeki was an important figure in the anti-apartheid struggle. In that same mythic year, Thabo Mbeki (Govan's eldest son) returned to South Africa for the first time in nearly three decades. It was a reunion of man, father, and country: "In a rare public display of emotion in Cape Town, he stood next to his father and wept, betraying the 'stiff upper lip' self-control and stoicism inculcated by his years of English training" (pp. 65-66).
- 2 Thabo Mbeki (b. 1942), like Nelson Mandela, was born in rural Transkei. The two men shared Xhosa roots. He came from a family of Xhosa *izifundizwa* (educated ones) deeply involved in the struggle for racial justice. Thabo's father had attended the same secondary school as Mandela, and the same Fort Hare College, and was also convicted and sentenced to jail for life alongside Mandela at the infamous Rivonia Trial in 1964. Govan had by then abandoned his wife and children for political activism. Due to his absence, Thabo Mbeki grew up largely without a father. The ANC would become his family, and Oliver Tambo his adopted father. Practically orphaned, Mbeki became an introverted loner, someone who excelled in school, but was aloof. His parents, English style, sent him off to boarding school, to Lovedale College in Eastern Cape—the "Eton of Africa"—where he learned to wear the blazer and school tie and to assimilate into the Cape's elite anglophone culture. (The illustration on the cover shows him smoking a briar pipe.) An educated "black Englishman," Thabo won a scholarship to study economics at the University of Sussex, England, where he developed his trademark urbane, cosmopolitan demeanor.

- 3 He had also travelled to Moscow during the Cold War when the USSR supported the Black struggle against the apartheid regime, and lived in Zambia, Swaziland, and Nigeria during his many years in the external ANC. “Lacking a cultural core, the nomadic Mbeki necessarily improvised a polyglot identity that was neither completely African nor European,” (p. 17) writes Adekeye Adebajo in this portrait which came out in Ohio University’s wonderful Short Histories of Africa series of professionally edited paperbacks that provide concise guides to noteworthy events and great lives. Adekeye himself has a polyglot identity. A Nigerian-born Rhodes Scholar who studied at St. Anthony’s College in Oxford, then the Fletcher School in Boston, before running the Centre for Conflict Resolution in Cape Town and joining the University of Johannesburg; Ade may explicitly reject Carlyle’s “Great Man” view of history (p. 10) yet he nevertheless empathizes with Mbeki, and at times reveals as much about himself as his subject: “It is often said that exiles keep journeying but somehow never quite arrive at their destination” (p. 65).
- 4 This eminently readable life story relies for its documentation on the work of previous biographers, especially Mark Gevisser’s *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), and Adrian Hadland and Jovial Rantao’s *The Life and Times of Thabo Mbeki* (Rivonia: Zebra, 1999), as well as on more popular cinematic works such as the 2009 movie *Endgame*, which portrayed Mbeki’s secret negotiations with the white South African business community that led to the Harare Declaration of 1989, resulting in the ANC being unbanned, and Mandela’s release from prison in 1990.
- 5 The leitmotif of Adebajo’s portrait is that Mbeki was a complex figure, full of contradictions and paradoxes who, because of his aloof and polyglot personality, may have failed to achieve his domestic agenda during his presidency (1999-2008), but because of his Pan-African vision knew major foreign policy accomplishments. Adebajo, a lifelong disciple of Ali Mazrui, and presently director of UJ’s Institute for Pan-African Thought, compares Mbeki to the great Pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. A specialist in international relations, Adebajo’s biography of Mbeki is distinguished by his professional interest in Mazrui’s ideal of Pan-Africanism and the potential for South Africa to contribute to the continent’s “dream deferred.”
- 6 A founder of the African Union (AU), Mbeki became that Pan-African organization’s first chair in 2002-2007. He participated in the creation of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) in 2001, and at the AU summit in Durban launching the African Peer Review Mechanism in 2002 to promote adherence to the AU’s principles of democracy. His “quiet diplomacy” with Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, his “Cape-to-Congo” expansion of the South African Development Community (SADC) into Kabila’s Democratic Republic of Congo, his accession of South Africa into what started as an exclusively Brazilian-Russian-Indian-Chinese alliance to create BRICS (with an “S”), his bilateral partnership with Obasanjo to turn the two regional hegemony Nigeria and South Africa into major trading partners, and most of all, his ideal of an “African Renaissance,” mark Mbeki’s foreign policy as his “most noteworthy legacy” (p. 111).
- 7 This notwithstanding, his domestic presidency was less impressive. Having spent his entire career working as a *protégé* of his mentor Oliver Tambo, Mbeki found himself orphaned once more when Tambo died in 1993, and scrambled for the patronage of another ANC grandee, Nelson Mandela, with whom he had a more complicated relationship. Despite their shared Xhosa Transkei background, Mandela was charismatic and hugely popular with a broad mass of his fellow South Africans. Mbeki

was bureaucratic and relied on political intrigue and backroom deals within the new ruling party. Mandela had lived almost his whole life in South Africa. Mbeki had spent 28 years outside the country, in both Europe and Africa. Mandela ruled like a constitutional monarch leaving policy to his ministers. Mbeki was a workaholic who micromanaged affairs to a degree that often turned allies into enemies. Working in Mandela's shadow as the ANC deputy president, while ostensibly serving his country's iconic hero, Mbeki from that umbrage was also preparing for his own succession.

- 8 In reality, Mbeki had been the actual chief executive of post-apartheid South Africa during the transition. "Though Mandela was nominally in charge of the country between 1994 and 1999, the septuagenarian patriarch effectively handed over the chairing of cabinet meetings to the two deputy presidents, Mbeki and F. W. de Klerk, and largely served as a ceremonial president, leaving the day-to-day running of the country mainly to Thabo" (p. 71). Therefore, the ANC's failure to follow its transfer of political power from a White minority to a Black majority with a commensurate transfer of economic power can legitimately be placed at the feet of Mandela's heir apparent. What Mbeki did domestically with his quiet influence was to negotiate a transfer of wealth to a new South African elite under the guise of "Black Economic Empowerment."
- 9 Adebajo considers alternative possible worlds when he describes the rivalry between Mbeki and the more radical Chris Hani who famously challenged him for the deputy presidency of the ANC. Elders in the party convinced both men to step down. Mbeki then experienced one of the most difficult periods in his life. It ended only in 1993, when he took the ANC chairmanship from Oliver Tambo and a right-wing extremist assassinated Chris Hani outside his Johannesburg home. "If he had not been murdered," Adebajo counterfactually suggests, "many have speculated that the popular and charismatic Chris Hani might well have acceded to the country's presidency instead of Mbeki in June 1999" (p. 69).
- 10 Mbeki's domestic presidency was anything but Hani's radical nationalization and land redistribution as promised by the ANC during its long struggle against apartheid. Instead Mbeki implemented his Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) policy designed to assure investors: "GEAR was pure alchemy," writes Adebajo in his oft poetical style: "a futile attempt to turn lead into gold through mysterious incantations from neo-liberal prophets" (p. 97). As for Black Economic Empowerment, it was this corrupt "crony capitalism" (p. 100) that probably provoked the Landless People's Movement (p. 101) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (p. 157) into South Africa's contemporary dialectic of rich and poor.
- 11 The personification of that dialectical antithesis would be his Zulu nemesis Jacob Zuma, whose native populism defeated Mbeki's elitism in a struggle for control of the ruling party. Mbeki was a Coriolanus undermined by his own character, Adebajo argues (p. 24), who was forced out of office in 2008 along with his "Xhosa Nostra" (p. 107) of insiders (members of his ethnic group who were overrepresented on his cabinet). "Zuma relied on guile and a better understanding of popular politics to mobilise support for his spectacular victory at the ANC's Polokwane conference in December 2007" (p. 110).
- 12 This biography manages to reach a balance between those who praise Mbeki and those who come to bury him. Ali Mazrui famously wrote that Nkrumah was a great Pan-

African but not a great Ghanaian. Adebajo asks his readers—will Mbeki come to be viewed in a similar vein? (p. 164).

- 13 There are few weaknesses in this portrait of Mbeki, except for those inherent to the structural limitations of this small volume-format published by Ohio and the subject of the biography. The book is simply divided into seven brief chapters and is meant as an introduction, not a definitive study. A small book is limited structurally but, in this case, mostly by the fact that the subject is still alive and that Adebajo had no special access to Mbeki's personal papers or archives. The paucity of records, despite the fact that Mbeki's post-presidential life is one of a retired politician, aged 77, no longer politically active, impedes the author from drawing proper conclusions on the historical importance of the man. Herodotus advised us never to judge a man's life until it is over. Brian Pottinger in *The Mbeki Legacy* (Johannesburg, Penguin, 2010) managed to write an extensive compendium of Mbeki's political legacy a decade ago, but still not of the man and his life history. Until his private papers, diaries, letters, and other personal life records are made available, this small volume by Adebajo stands to outline the importance of Mbeki as a key political figure, useful as the introductory sketch it was meant to be, while we await an exhaustive life history in the style of Herbert Lottman in coming years.