

Mary L. Dudziak. *Exporting American Dreams: Thurgood Marshall's African Journey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. xii + 257 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-532901-8.



Reviewed by Babacar M'Baye (Department of English and Department of Pan-African Studies, Kent State University)

Published on H-Law (January, 2009)

Commissioned by Michael J. Pfeifer

## Thurgood Marshall in Africa

Mary L. Dudziak's *Exporting American Dreams* successfully explores the relations between Thurgood Marshall and Africa through the prism of African American connections with Africa during the twentieth century. The book also examines the ironic and complicated status of African Americans who experienced the inequalities, frustration, and poverty that institutionalized segregation and racism had fostered in the United States during the 1950s.

*Exporting American Dreams* begins with a study of the interdependency between the two questions "what is Africa to me?" and "what is America to me?" that Dudziak poses in order to corroborate James Campbell's argument that "Africa has served historically as one of the chief terrains on which African Americans have negotiated their relationship to American society" (p. 2). Using this thesis as a framework, Dudziak discusses Marshall's attempt to use the legal expertise and wisdom he gained from the civil rights struggle in the United States as subversive tools in Kenya's fight for independence and democracy. Dudziak pays special attention to Marshall's travels to Africa and England, specifically to Nairobi and

London in January 1960, where he helped rival factions of Kenya's political elite prepare a democratic constitution for their future independent nation. Marshall's task was difficult, since, as Dudziak suggests, the U.S. government wanted him to help "write a tricky constitution that will give the Africans in Kenya complete political power on the basis of a democratically elected government by universal franchise, while protecting the rights of white minorities which is [sic] outnumbered about 100 to one" (p. 46). This statement highlights Marshall's involvement in the early diplomatic efforts that contributed to Kenya's independence on December 12, 1963.

*Exporting American Dreams* participates in a promising scholarship on African American relationships with Africa, joining such works as Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Tunde Adeleke's *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (1998), John Cullen Gruesser's *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa* (2000), Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003),

and Campbell's *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (2006). These works have expanded the promising field of black Atlantic studies by examining the relations between black literary and political figures in the United States and Africa within interdisciplinary frameworks. They reveal the paradoxes African Americans faced during the 1950s and early 1960s when they upheld and marketed American principles of democracy and freedom abroad while being denied these privileges at home. When they traveled abroad, African Americans were perceived as representatives of America's notions of democracy and freedom that were ideals rather than realities for the majority of blacks in the United States.

The quandary of African Americans vis-à-vis the exportation of American dreams was also apparent in 1960 when the U.S. government selected Marshall, the lead African American lawyer in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), as a figure who "could help recast the image of American democracy in Africa" (p. 5). On the one hand, this selection was an upright decision that bestowed on Marshall the honorable position of spokesman of American democracy in Africa. On the other hand, the choice was not totally benign since it was also driven by the American government's attempt to export an image that did not reflect the conditions of African Americans. As Dudziak points out, in an attempt to counter the racial discrimination that remained "the nation's Achilles heel," the American government had sent Marshall on a peaceful world diplomatic tour to Japan, Korea, and Kenya (pp. 5, 42). The U.S. government intended to conceal the racial violence that besieged African Americans in the 1950s and that cast dark clouds on the progress that was made in the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. In addition, the U.S. government had sent Marshall abroad to prove the superiority of American democracy versus the "terror" and "oppression" that characterized the political ideology of the Soviet Union (p. 5).

Furthermore, *Exporting American Dreams* debunks stereotypes that Westerners have about Africa. Alluding to the riots and ethnic violence that destabilized Kenya during the presidential election of December 2007, Dudziak cautions Westerners against interpreting these events as evidence that tribalism drives African politics. According to Dudziak, these events are indicative of "the broader story of Kenya's continuing struggle for democracy and the more complex political background against which the election played out" (p. 6). This background suggests the negative effects that state authoritarianism and "big-man politics" played in shaping Kenya's trans-

formation into a democratic nation-state. Another prejudice that Dudziak dismantles is the Western stereotyping of Africa as a backward continent. Dudziak cites the sentiments of Thom Mboya, a twenty-six-year-old Kenyan independence fighter who had visited the United States in 1956 and 1959 to establish relationships with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). During his second visit to the United States, Mboya decried the demeaning ways in which Americans saw Africa as a "dark continent" with "jungles, wild beasts and fierce, ignorant, [and] furiously dancing tribesmen" (p. 19). Countering this imagery, Mboya emphasized Africa's commonality with American urbanity, which is evident in its "modern cities, roads, airfields, houses, cars and so on" (p. 19). Another connection between Africa and America involves their shared historical experiences of colonialism and racism, and a yearning to break the yoke of these oppressions through resistance and the formation of a collective identity. Dudziak refers to the American War of Independence, the Boston Tea Party, and the struggle of African Americans for the desegregation of schools in the United States as "inspiration to Africans" (p. 18). Dudziak thus initiates a new paradigm in the study of America's connections with Africa by inspiring scholars to explore the search for democracy, liberty, and progress that has motivated both Africans and Americans.

The significance of Dudziak's book is also visible in its analysis of the meeting between Mboya and Marshall at the Lancaster House conference in London in January 1960. The goal of the conference was to negotiate Kenya's constitutional framework and independence from Britain. Marshall had a difficult task at the Lancaster House conference since he was a negotiator who did not want to be perceived by Oginga Odinga, the leader of the country's main opposition party, as a supporter of Mboya. Marshall played his diplomatic roles successfully and was later able to convey to Americans the demand of Kenya's nationalist leaders that British colonial powers liberate Jomo Kenyatta from prison. Kenyatta had been in prison since April 8, 1953. Marshall thus supported a major African nationalist leader who later developed strong diplomatic ties with the United States while remaining devoted to the social, political, and economic emancipation of Africa. Odinga and Mboya had different political allegiances despite their common descent from the same Luo ethnic group. Dudziak writes: "Both were members of the Luo tribe, which was concentrated in the Nyanza Province on the shores of Lake Victoria. Odinga worked to unite

the Luo and would emerge as the politician with the strongest base among the tribe. He was the most persistent of the African Elected Members in working for Kenyatta's release. Mboya's political constituency was the urban Nairobi central district, and he was the only rising Kenyan political figure with a constituency that was not principally defined by the tribe" (p. 46). The differences between Odinga and Mboya also stemmed from a clash between advocates and detractors of the notion of ethnic essentialism that Dudziak identifies as "tribalism." Barack Obama Sr., the father of current U.S. President Barack Obama, witnessed this tension since, as Dudziak suggests, he was a supporter of Odinga (p. 21). This argument makes us wonder how close Barack Obama Sr. was to Mboya's political ideologies, since both individuals despised ethnic fundamentalism.

After reading Dudziak's interesting book, one is tempted to ask: "Why did Marshall have such close ties with Africans?" Dudziak answers this question by representing Marshall as one of the African American leaders who extended their hands to Africa during the late 1950s and early 60s to overcome the isolation and racism blacks experienced in the United States. Dudziak writes:

"Africa was part of an American exit. Joining the colonization movement, leaving America for Africa, was a way of expressing a deep dissatisfaction with the place the nation had made for its black citizens" (p. 107). This African American disillusionment with the United States was also apparent in the journey of Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, and other black leaders to Africa, where they were treated better than in the United States and found strong support for their civil rights struggle (p. 107-108). Yet Bayard Rustin complicates these connections between African Americans and Africans. According to Dudziak, Rustin viewed African Americans' yearning for Africa as an attitude that stemmed less from their "relation to Africa than to America" (pp. 150-151). According to Rustin, the "Back-to-Africa movement" was spearheaded by African Americans' disappointment with the pattern of "progress, aroused hopes, frustration, and despair," a tendency that led many blacks to revert to "separatism" in the 1960s (p. 151). In sum, the book suggests the fleeting nature of democratic ideals in the mid-twentieth century, the exportation of which was easily spoiled when they became a fleeting illusion, rather than a feasible dream, in the lives of African Americans in the United States.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

**Citation:** Babacar M'Baye. Review of Dudziak, Mary L., *Exporting American Dreams: Thurgood Marshall's African Journey*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23939>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.