

BOOK REVIEW

Jon Soske. *Internal Frontiers: African Nationalism and the Indian Diaspora in Twentieth-Century South Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017. xviii + 342 pp. Note on language. Notes. Bibliography. Paper. \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-8214-2284-7.

Jon Soske's *Internal Frontiers: African Nationalism and the Indian Diaspora in Twentieth-Century South Africa* is one of the best available studies on African-Indian relations. He simultaneously provides a deep political exploration of modern South Africa, original meditations on nation and nationalism, an intellectual history of non-western thought, and a close analysis of race beyond black and white. One outstanding achievement is his insight on racialization, a topic often skirted in the existing scholarship on African-Indian, and more broadly African-Asian, encounters. Soske defines race clearly at the outset "as a set of social relationships, way of talking about and understanding the world, and as an object of intellectual debate and political struggle" (xvii). He convincingly shows how the concept of race in South Africa has been dynamic, changing against the backdrop of local and global transformations, such as urbanization in Durban, Indian independence, the election of the Nationalist Party in 1948, and the Cold War.

The introduction is important and timely reading, as African-Indian tensions have risen, particularly around Gandhi's racial politics, in Ghana, Malawi, and elsewhere. Such tensions are hardly new, and Indians themselves hardly agree on Gandhi or on race. Soske outlines the history of Tamils, Telugus, and Gujaratis in South Africa, and, though the book focuses more on black political divides than on differences among Indians, it reminds readers of parallels between the African National Congress (ANC) and Gandhi. These luminaries have dominated national and global historical narratives as champions of multiracialism and multiculturalism because the end appeared to justify the means, until now.

The six chapters, divided into three sections, detail how the difficult path toward multiracialism ran through everyday encounters between Africans and Indians in Durban, a rapidly growing city in the early 1900s, which incubated racial intimacies and tensions that grew to inform and engulf the agenda of the ANC and other political parties. The first section explores the growing political importance of relations between Africans, Indians, and Coloureds in the World War II era. African illegal migration to Durban increased dramatically, forcing blacks into informal and inferior

housing, transportation, and employment. Anti-Indian politics grew around starkly hierarchical relationships between Indian “merchants” and blacks in Durban but became generalized “through the work of discourse...as a strategy for mobilizing sections of populations” (40). With revitalization of the Indian Congress, internationalization of the South African government’s treatment of Indians at the United Nations, and the formation of new black political parties, the ANC’s A.B. Xuma and Anton Lembede tackled the question of cooperation between non-Europeans with urgency. The plan to reject all but limited cooperation with Indians, however, changed with the election of the Nationalist Party in 1948.

The second section examines how, following the election, anti-Indian riots in Durban in 1949 created an unprecedented crisis for the ANC. Contrasted with earlier distancing of Indians, after the violence, A.P. Mda, Lembede’s successor as ANC Youth leader, worried about African “fascism” comparable to that of the Afrikaners (116). The popular mood was equally anxious, not only over economic woes but also over interracial sex, Indian male predation against African women especially, and “unsullied” Indian purity, predicated on religion and caste-prescribed marriages (151). Political leaders, recognizing problems of social intimacy, increasingly articulated a multiracialism “around the public friendship of African and Indian men” (162).

The third section explores the ANC’s post-1949 multiracialism, formalized with the foundation of the Congress Alliance laid near the end of the 1952 Defiance Campaign. ANC president Albert Luthuli’s multiracialist philosophy emerged from many elements, including an African and Christian universalist conceptualization of the “the people as multiplicity” (193), not on a claim of commonality as in Western democracies. One of the most original aspects of Soske’s analysis is how his imagined nation was sealed in public and media images, if less in lived realities. Luthuli faced challenges from within his party, most strongly from anticommunist Jordan Ngubane and centralist Oliver Tambo. In their negotiations and disagreements, differing visions of political subjectivity were laid out and layered into the ANC agenda.

The making of South Africa’s multiracialism was fraught but expansive, allowing for the airing of ideologies developed from lived experiences and observations of communism, African-American civil rights struggles, and Gandhianism. The many layers of Soske’s storytelling, from African-Indian intimacies to the globally mediatized Defiance Campaign, are remarkable. Some elements, however, are lost along the way. Focus on the Indian question diminishes in later chapters, leaving the reader to wonder how intimacy and urbanization proceeded in relation to the conscious publicization of African-Indian political alliances. Only limited attention is given to African and Indian political philosophies, despite Soske’s insistence on their importance. Relatively brief discussions of Zulu cosmology and the Christian theology of Luthuli (and Isaiah Shembe) are helpful, but African Ethiopianism or other religious politics get no mention. Caste Hinduism commands

more analysis than is perhaps deserved, implying Indian cultural retentiveness that is surely not uniform among Indian Muslims, Christians, or even Hindus. These small points, however, do not detract, and should encourage scholars to engage Soske's book as a catalyst for more research. Like the introduction, the conclusion is thought-provoking, serving as a reminder that South Africans strove for an ideal of personhood that still eludes us.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Byfield, Judith. "Rethinking the African Diaspora." *African Studies Review* 43 (1): 1–9. doi:10.1017/S0002020600036271.

Patterson, Tiffany Ruby, and Robin D. G. Kelley. 2000. "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World." *African Studies Review* 43 (1): 11–45. doi:10.2307/524719.

Zeleza, Paul Tiyambe. 2010. "African Diasporas: Toward a Global History." *African Studies Review* 53 (1): 1–19. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0274.