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# PIO GAMA PINTO

Kenya's Unsung Martyr  
1927 - 1965

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PIO GAMA PINTO:  
KENYA'S UNSUNG  
MARTYR, 1927-1965  
BY SHIRAZ  
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Edited by  
Shiraz Durrani

Book Review, Politics

**REVIEW BY SELMA  
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**Review by Selma Carvalho**

*A concise version of this review first appeared on the Oheraldo Goa on 11 January, 2019.*

Curiously, a road in Nairobi is named after Pio Gama Pinto. Curious, because it is named after a Goan. But Pio was foremost a Kenyan, deeply involved in Kenya's nationalist struggle, and whose assassination, in 1965, made him Kenya's first martyr.

His legacy, sadly, has not been documented in a biography, neither by Goans nor by Kenyans. But a recently released book titled, *Pio Gama Pinto: Kenya's Unsung Martyr, 1927-1965*, edited by Shiraz Durrani, seeks, in some measure, to fill this vacuum. The book is a collection of essays, letters and other documents which loosely piece together his role in Kenyan politics. Several reasons have hindered documentation of Pio's life. Chief among these, is the political climate at the time of Pio's death which did much to intimidate and censor free speech. This led Pio's close friends to burn the bulk of his private papers. Nor, has the state of secrecy been any less in Britain. Although any number of prominent personalities can be researched through Britain's various archives, there is no file on Pio. Either it is not yet declassified, or the British have been known to conveniently lose files. More importantly, there is the question of who could be a capable biographer? Anyone who embarks on this task must be at least somewhat acquainted with the Goan milieu while also being a scholar of Kenya's political history.



Pio Gama Pinto Road, Nairobi, Kenya.

What we know about Pio, then, has been gleaned from contemporaries, family members, newspaper reports and Pio's own writing, of which very little survives. Pio was born on 31 March, 1927 in Nairobi. When he was about 8, his father sent him to India for his education. He studied Arts and briefly joined the Indian Air Force in 1944 as a clerk. He then worked for the Post and Telegraphs Company in Bombay. An essay by Rosario, Pio's brother, although a wonderful read, disappointingly, does not shed further light on Pio's childhood or indeed his family dynamics. This aspect of Pio's life is crucial to understanding his early influences. It seems likely that Pio's formative influence was the trade union dissidence in Bombay, which in a fundamental way was linked to the greater aspiration of national independence. In all likelihood, the trade union movement which was largely co-opted by leftist leaders engaged in India's class struggles, profoundly influenced Pio's own politics.

There is the often-repeated story that Pio played a prominent role in Goa's Liberation movement. What saves it from being an apocryphal story is that it stems from Pio's own writings wherein he

states that he ‘took an active part in the Goa National Congress and was one of its founder members and a member of its National Executive.’ But this assertion does pose a problem. The National Congress Goa, [NCG] was formed in 1946 during meetings held at Londa. At the time, Pio would have been a young man of about 19 years. His name does not feature in popular liberation lore, nor is he mentioned in the *Who’s Who of Freedom Fighters* published by the Goa Gazetteer Department. Doubtless, Pio was allied with the movement, and he might have travelled to Londa to attend the formation meetings as hundreds of Goans had, but we will need more corroborating evidence to understand the extent and exact nature of his involvement. Fitz de Souza, Kenyan-Goan nationalist lawyer, however, gives a detailed account of Pio’s lobbying for Goa’s decolonisation in the years preceding its eventual liberation.

What is well documented is the central role Pio played in Kenya’s nationalist movement. Upon his return to Kenya in 1949, Pio immediately involved himself with the trade union movement which had gained traction under the leadership of Makhan Singh, Fred Kubai and Bildad Kaggia. Makhan Singh recalls meeting Pio for the first time, and then later his dedication to Kenya African National Union (KANU). Joseph Murumbi, of part-Goan origin, and Kenya’s second vice-president, shares insights into Pio’s character, particularly his private philanthropy and assistance to people in need of aid. The grotesque injustices perpetrated on indigenous populations, disparities in income and distribution of arable land, had led to much discontent, and would ultimately fuel the Mau Mau movement in which Pio played a pivotal role.

In January 1954, Pio married Emma Dias, whose family was from Borda, Goa. The minutiae of daily life recounted by Emma gives us a window, albeit a tiny window, into his private life. She describes him as being ‘gentle, kind, thoughtful and quiet’. A man, continuously on the move, athletic, deeply committed to social causes, and able to offer Emma very little by way of material comfort. Her parents had gifted the couple a car, washing machines, a sewing machine and a substantial cash cheque. Shortly after their marriage, Pio was arrested, incarcerated first at Takwa Detention Camp on Manda Island, and later at Kabernet, and released finally in 1959.

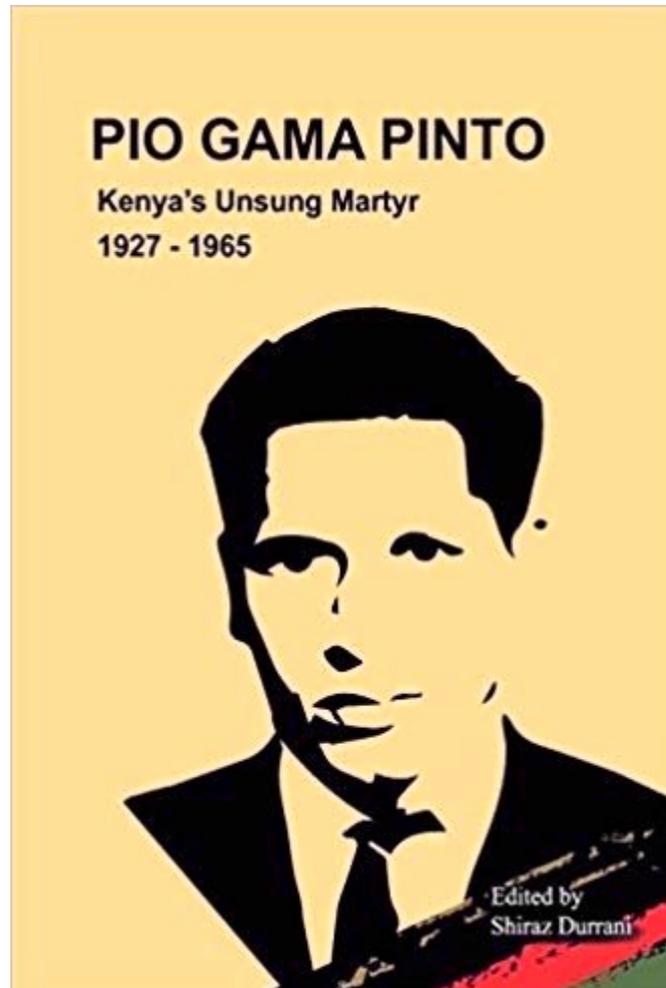
Of particular interest is a section titled ‘Pinto in his Own Words’ which includes a brief history of the freedom struggle written by Pio, and his letters, which perhaps, shed the most light on the precise and methodical nature of his mind; stating without fanfare the facts at hand, the cause of freedom being his prime motivating factor.

One surprising revelation is Pio’s relationship with the ‘Sixties US Black civil rights leader Malcolm X. The two men had met when Malcolm X visited Africa and formed a close bond. Both were assassinated just a few days apart. A link is inferred between these two assassinations, and possible foreign involvement in Pio’s death but the link is too tenuous to be taken seriously. The political history of Kenya, and the assassinations which followed Pio’s, which were no doubt state-sanctioned, should lead us to conclude that Pio’s death was a Kenyan affair.

What we see emerge, is a portrait of Pio as a tremendously influential broker of political power. He excelled at bringing together disparate groups whose common ideology was universal freedom and suffrage. In this regard, he engaged with and leveraged the power of Indian politicians, British MPs, and of course, Kenyan leaders in the making. He had the ability to spot opportunity, he created pockets of resistance whether that was by forming groups as innocuous-sounding as the KAU African Study Circle or blatantly nationalist as the Kenya Freedom Party. He was a relentless letter writer, propitiating help from all those in a position to help, and he continued being part of the journalistic world right up to end. In 1962, he was the commercial manager of the Pan Africa press.

Because the book is a collection of various essays and articles, it does tend to repeat information. Nonetheless, it is an impressive read with a multitude of sources quoted, and documentation

provided. As a reader though, one cannot help wishing for a more chronological and critical biography on Pio's life. The real fear is, the time has passed for such a rendering. Most of Pio's contemporaries are dead, his private papers destroyed, files missing or unavailable. It will take tremendous investment, herculean effort, courage and conviction to pursue this project.



*Pio Gama Pinto: Kenya's Unsung Martyr, 1927 - 1965*, (Vita Books, 2018), is edited by Shiraz Durrani, a British-Kenyan writer and editor, known for his writings on Kenyan politics. The book is available for purchase [from Africa Books Collective]