

PAN AFRICANISM

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ABSTRACT

Pan-Africanism was an idea that metamorphosed into a movement. It was conceived by few African-Americans in the New World out of the traumatic slavery experience in the nineteenth century. When the Atlantic slave trade was finally abolished, the legitimate trade on African agricultural produce was introduced. This change of events necessitated European colonisation of African States. Before the first quarter of the twentieth century, more than three-quarters of the African States had been colonised by the European imperialists. Pan-African movement was therefore formed to unite Africans including Afro-Americans as one people, and also to be used as an instrument to decolonise the African continent. This write-up is a tribute to the exponents of the African course in this regard.

INTRODUCTION

The African continent is the largest home of the blacks in the world. Africans are people of different and sometimes contrasting culture, but have many things in common. Apart from earliest times of inter-ethnic economic relations and contact during inter-ethnic wars, African contact with Europeans was very minimal. The European contact with the Africans which recorded a remarkable impact, began in the early years of the 19th century. The period witnessed the European removal of able bodied Africans en mass (as slaves) to the New World, to supplement the labour of the West Indians employed to work in the plantations established in what was then known as the New World.

The growth of science and technology in Europe especially in Britain, soon catalysed the idea to abolish the Atlantic slave trade. Soon after the abolition of the slave trade, the legitimate trade on European goods and African raw materials was introduced. The legitimate trade brought the European merchants and the Africans in close commercial contact for the first time. This development gradually and inevitably led to the European occupation of African States through the Berlin Conference of 1884.

Between 1957 and 1960, agitations were high in all colonial states of Africa, for independence. By the close of 1960, about seventeen African states under colonial rule had become independent (Buah:1969). It was an attempt to re-organise independent African states and Africans in Diaspora under a united status as "United States of Africa". The idea of Pan-Africanism was conceived. Political leaders of African descent W.E.B. Du Bois (United States), Marcus Garvey (Jamaica), Dr. Wilmot Blyder, James Johnson and Kwame Nkrumah (all of West Africa), Haile Selassie (Ethiopia) Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya) and Barrister Henry Sylvester-Williams (Trinidad), all struggled at various levels, to promote Pan-African ideals for African Unity.

This write-up is packaged as a tribute to immortalise the legendary African leaders of surpassing personalities in the Pan-African course. It is hoped that this tribute will rekindle the spirit of Pan-Africanism in the minds of present African leaders to build upon the legacies of past advocates of African emancipation and unity.

PAN-AFRICANISM: A MOVEMENT FOR AFRICAN UNITY

The concept of Pan-Africanism first began as a vague emotional idea meant to influence the life of the Negroes of the New World (Okafor *et al*, 1990) also known as African Americans. As earlier noted in this write-up, the Negroes here-referred, were the African victims of the obnoxious Trans-Atlantic slave trade of the 19th century. In spite of the differences that existed among the unfortunate African Americans in their languages and States of origin, the realisation that:

- i. All Africans have identical cultural affinity,
- ii. Colonial Africans had similar experience,
- iii. Africans constitute, in the world, a down-trodden people.
- iv. African Americans had similar slavery experience with a common problem and aspiration.

These rekindled in the Pan-Africanists the desire to pull their ideas together for mutual support for their liberation, and for more effective voice in world affairs. These ideas of black liberation were expressed freely in the various Pan-African congresses held to discuss the African course.

Pan-Africanism as an expression of African Unity started in the 19th century in America and Europe (Buah, 1969:330). Men of African descent, especially in the New World were the first to express Pan-African ideas. During the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Negro slaves in the New World and their descendants expressed their desire to return to their ancestral homes in Africa in their songs and poems popularly called "Negro spiritual" (Olaniyan ed 1982:127). After many years of slavery and the later freedom in the New World, the unfortunate victims could not know from which part of Africa their ancestors were taken into slavery. They began to conceive the idea of Africa as one vast country to which they belonged. Thus, it is not surprising that it was people of African descent outside Africa that were the first to express feeling about a United Africa in the 19th century.

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, Pan-African movement had become very popular especially among black students studying in England. In 1900, the first Pan-African congress was organised in London by Barrister Henry Sylvester-Williams of Trinidad. Although some Africans attended the congress, most of the delegates were Africa-Americans from the New World. Among them were the Pan-African exponents in the New World, W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey a Jamaican immigrant to the New World. At the conference, the black nationalists in the New World spoke aloud not only of their sufferings, but also of the sufferings of African peoples under colonialism. They called on all black men everywhere in the world to form a united front to liberate themselves from the yoke of the whites. The congress pointed out the displacement of people of African origin from positions of importance in both colonial Africa and the New World because of colour difference. It was in response to this problems of racial discrimination and other similar experiences that W.E.B. Du Bois made his celebrated prediction that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of colour line" (Okafor *et al*, 128).

The second Pan-African congress was held in Paris in 1919 after the World War I. The congress was convened at the instance of its U.S.-Based coordinator W.E.B. Du Bois. The Paris Pan-African congress would have met with obstacle, but for the presence and disposition of Blaise Diagne of Senegal who was in attendance at the meeting. The resolution at this conference, though not far reaching, the spirit behind

the convening of the conference was commendable. Later in 1927, the congress met again in New York. Suffice it to say that like earlier Pan-African congresses, at this congress the Black leaders from the United States and the West Indies expressed their strong desires to achieve the following aims:

- i. To bring people of African descent in all parts of the world together, and thereby serve as a forum through which they could protest against European colonisation of Africa;
- ii. To appeal to missionary and philanthropic opinions in Britain to protect Africans against the aggression of the colonisers;
- iii. To find ways of establishing more friendly relations between African people and their European oppressors;
- iv. To recover for the people of the black race all over the world, their dignity and self respect;
- v. To conduct serious studies into the conditions of black people everywhere, disseminate the results of such studies, and to bring the educated black people together periodically to discuss, deliberate and formulate action upon the conditions and problems of the black race (Aziken 2003, 94).

At the end of the congress, all in attendance left in high spirits, resolute in their determination to achieve their objectives for the black race.

In 1945, yet another Pan-African congress was held in Manchester. The congress was chaired by Dr. Peter Milhard from West Indies. It was at this Manchester congress Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana made his debut in Pan-African movement. He served as joint secretary with George Padmore from West Indies to the congress. T.R. Makonnen from Ethiopia was the treasurer, while Jomo Kenyatta from Kenya was assistant secretary (Barradough, 1967). The congress was well attended by many Africans of diverse backgrounds. They rejected colonialism in its entirety and emphasised adopting measures that would lead to the unity and political freedom of African states. Their burning desire to achieve the aim of African unity and freedom made them more militant at the Manchester congress in their utterances. The congress demanded an immediate end to colonialism in Africa, and called upon the intellectuals, workers and peasants of African countries to unite into mass movements to achieve its objectives. The congress advised the use of labour instruments of strikes, boycotts and other means of positive actions as measures to destroy colonialism.

W.E.B. Du Bois expected preponderant influence in the Pan-African congresses. His objective was not to incite the black people to become hostile to the white oppressors, but to work for peaceful cooperation between the two races. He advocated a gradual approach that would persuade the white oppressors to consider improvement in the plight of the blackman. This spirit of gradualism was imbibed by the "Monrovia group" of African states: Liberia, Togo, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Libya, Cote d'ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger Republic, Dahomey and other eight newly independent French-speaking African nations, whose collective aim was to achieve African unity slowly in stages (Buah, 334-335). This group stressed the importance of cooperation in economic matters as the first stage in the development (Zdenek, 1977:1).

Marcus Garvey appeared on the Pan-African scene in 1916 (Olaniyan ed. 1982). Unlike Du Bois, he was more radical in his approach to Pan-Africanism. He appealed to the poor masses, down-trodden Afro-Americans and people of black race to develop pride in their colour. Marcus Garvey was poised to organise black people to employ force, to drive the European colonisers out of Africa. His other major

concern was to encourage black people to challenge the economic domination of the world by European mercantilism. To achieve this economic objective, Marcus Garvey founded the "Black Star line" as a shipping company to compete favourably with the European merchants in the shipping enterprise.

Relentless in his drive to achieve success, Marcus Garvey founded the "Universal Negro Improvement Association," earlier in 1917. This association grew in size with branches throughout the black world. Marcus Garvey also established a newspaper called *Negro World*, a weekly which was published in English, French, and Spanish with distribution coverage to include West, Central and South Africa (Olaniyan ed. 1982:128). Like the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the *Negro World* emphasised "Africa for the Africans." He advocated the return of black people in the New World to Africa, and the unification of Africans into a single entity as United States of Africa. Garvey also called for commercial connections between West Africa and his shipping company the Black Star Line, which he intended to use to evacuate the Africans in the New World back to "our ancestral home" Africa. All these noble plans did not achieve any resounding success because:

- i. Garvey's radical approach did not appeal to the educated elite among the black Africans.
- ii. Liberia where he had planned to resettle his fellow black compatriots refused to allow him land where he would establish a colony.
- iii. The white community opposed his intentions and eventually arrested and imprisoned him on the charge of using the mail to defraud innocent black men (Okafor et al, 129).

Achievements of Pan-African Movement

It should be recalled that at the inception of Pan-African Movement, its vanguards aimed at the following objectives:

1. Unification of all black people in the world.
2. The return of all Negro slaves in the New World to Africa.
3. The decolonisation of colonised African states.
4. The formation of a United States of Africa under a single government with one voice in world affairs.

To this end, the exponents of Pan-Africanism: W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Barrister Henry Sylvester-Williams, George Podmore and their African counterparts Kwame Nkrumah, T.R. Makonnen, Blaise Diagne and Jomo Keyatta and so on, using the movement as an instrument, recorded resounding achievements for the Black people all over the world.

1. The militant approach employed by Marcus Garvey in fighting the African course through his "Universal Negro Movement Association" influenced the inspiration of later African leaders. They were motivated by the soldierly spirit of Marcus Garvey to demand for their countries' independence through radical approach, and at the end succeeded. For example, after a hard and uphill struggle against the forces of imperialism, the British colony of Gold Coast (Ghana) became independent on 6th March 1957. Such radical approach achieved similar objective elsewhere in Africa.

2. The activities of the Pan-African Movement instilled the sense of pride in Africans in America and Africa. Black, as a skin colour, became competitively adjudged equal to the European skin colour by Africans. The African military returnees from the two world wars demonstrated the equality of black and white skin colour in their militant agitation for independence in their various countries (Fage, 1978).

3. Pan-African activities promoted the concept of self-determination among African leaders. It should be recalled that some African leaders of the time attended the Pan-African congresses held in European

countries. On their return they did not only become leaders of nationalist movements in their countries, they were full of determination to regain freedom, a feat they achieved after much struggle. In 1960 alone, as many as seventeen African states gained independence (Buah, 333). These countries are: Cameroun (January 1), Togo (April 27), Malagasy Republic (June 26), Zaire (June 30), Somali Republic (July 1), Benin Republic (August 1), Niger Republic (August 3), Upper Volta Burkinafaso (August 5), and Ivory Coast Cote d Voire (August 7). Others are: Chad (August 11), Central African Republic (August 13), Congo (August 15), Garbon (August 17), Senegal (August 25), Mali (September 22), Nigeria (October 1) and Mauritania (November 28) [Zdenek 1977: 226 -227].

4. The congresses provided a platform for the Africans in Diaspora and those on the home continent, to understand each other's aspiration in working together for the liberation of the African continent from colonialism. Mention of some examples would suffice. Back home in Africa, the African-based exponents of Pan-African Movement organised what was known as All-African Peoples' Conference held in Accra, Ghana in 1958. This conference stated its aims and objectives as follows:

- i. To promote understanding and unity among people of Africa.
- ii. To accelerate the liberation of Africa from imperialism and colonialism.
- iii. To mobilise world opinion against the denial of political rights and fundamental human rights to Africa.
- iv. To develop the feeling of one community among the people of Africa with the object of enhancing the emergence of a "United States of Africa" (Nkrumah's speech and Resolutions of the first All African Peoples Conference, Accra-1958).

These laudable dreams were unfortunately truncated by the later developments that unfolded in the African continent. There was the existence of ideological differences within the rank and file of the Brazzaville Twelve, Casablanca Group and the Monrovia Group. It became crystal clear that no independent African state leader was prepared to surrender the sovereignty of his country to form the "United States of Africa". This problem was soon compounded by the Congo crisis of 1960, the Algerian crisis of 1962 among others that split the African continent into ideological blocs. Secondly, the foremost national organisation in British West Africa founded in 1919, known as National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), derived inspiration from the ideals of Pan-Africanism. Thirdly, West African Student Union (WASU) also derived inspiration from Marcus Garvey's radical approach to the African course. The African Students Association (ASA) founded in 1942 by African students in the United States was not left out; their activities were very similar in character to WASU; all derived inspiration from Pan-African activities.

5. Though the ultimate dream of the exponents of Pan-African idea to unite Africa under one government similar to the system of government in United States of America, has not been realised, the collective will of the African-based Pan-Africanists led to the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) [Agbi 1996:1].

The organisation has since metamorphosed into the African Union (AU) with more focus on economic issues now than the old OAU's involvement on political matters. Other regional unions were also formed on trade, security, transport and communication lines. The failure of the Pan-Africanists to return all African-Americans to Africa, and the non-realisation of their dream to form a "United States of Africa" notwithstanding, black leaders in the world over should encourage one another to keep the Pan-African spirit alive. This could be achieved through periodic organisation of meetings of blacks, to discuss common issues of African unity, politics, economy and socio-cultural developments. In this wise, the

Organisation of African Unity (OAU) or African Union (AU) as it is presently called, can be used as the voice of Africa to refocus Pan-African aims and objectives to include peace, unity, freedom, liberty, justice and human dignity for all blacks within Africa and Africans in Diaspora.

Conclusions and Commendation

Attempts have been made in this study to unfold the genesis of the plight of the Blackman in the hands of European oppressors. The study aligned with others' opinions that the European establishment of plantation agriculture in the New World, led to the mass transportation of Africans as slaves, to supply the needed labour in the plantations. It also revealed that the European imperialism in African states came at the heels of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade.

These two events no doubt left two significant legacies on Africa. While the victims of the slave trade remained in exile as Africa-Americans without home except a vague picture of Africa, European imperialism in Africa culminated into colonialism in Africa. As events unfolded, it became expedient to coordinate black men in the New World and Africa for their emancipation and cooperation and possibly to form a United States of Africa. It is against this backdrop that the efforts of W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Dr. Peter Milhard, Barrister Henry Sylvester-Williams and their Africa based counterparts - Kwame Nkrumah, Blaise Diagne, T.R. Makonnen, Haile Sellasie, Jomo Kenyatta and so on, must be commended. The consistent courage especially of Du Bois and his New World counterparts, in seeing to a dream come through in the life of the black man, under a challenging and threatening environment is worth appreciating. They demonstrated that they were fearless in their resolute commitment to the African course, and the black race in general. The positions of significance Africa occupies in world affairs today, cannot but be credited to the untiring efforts of the exponents of Pan-Africanism. In their activities they touched the lives of the living and yet unborn Africans. Africans of the time were inspired to fight for their rights in their oppressive and exploitative colonial situation.

The Pan-Africanists spent their time, money and risk of their lives to redeem a lost race - the black race. Perhaps the oppression of the black race would have continued up till now. It is hoped that African leaders of this and future generations will keep the legacy of the Pan-Africanists perpetually alive, and improve on the present African-European relations of today for a better future.

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