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ORIGINS OF PAN-AFRICANISM: A RE-ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to show that the origin of Pan-Africanism dates back to a date earlier than the 18th century. It is noteworthy that Pan-Africanism is usually seen as something that started in the period of 18th and 19th centuries. This is so due to some reasons. Firstly, Pan-Africanism is seen as something that revolves around people of African stock standing up to Europeans. In that case, it cannot but be belligerent in nature. Secondly, arising from the above, is the failure to appreciate that there are strands to the phenomenon. Thirdly, there is the failure to appreciate that Pan-Africanism did not come in a one fell swoop fashion and that the beginning of any of the strands should mean the commencement of the phenomenon. The paper is based on textual analysis. Published books and articles were consulted in coming up with the position in the paper. It concludes that for Pan-Africanism to be placed in proper historical context, it must be seen as an issue of assertion of oneself by New World Africans before the Europeans as well as something meant to assuage the humiliation Blacks suffered at the hands of Whites.

Introduction

There is no doubt the fact that African peoples have interacted with peoples from other continents for centuries. These interactions have not been without effects on Africa and her peoples. A major effect is the dispersal of people of African descent to these other continents.¹ The most notable of these dispersals is the one to the western hemisphere. The significance of the dispersal to the New World lies in the sheer number of people involved² and the racial antagonism that attended it. An outcome of the aforementioned racial antagonism is the phenomenon called 'Pan-Africanism'. Though popular, considering that the history of the New World cannot be complete if Pan-Africanism is omitted, placing it in proper historical context has become problematical. This can

be seen in the conflicting and misleading dates writers and scholars have come up with on the matter. For instance, some claim it started in 1900³ while some others see it as a post-emancipation issue.⁴ Yet some trace it to the ancient times of Africa⁵ – a date that is no doubt, nebulous. The aim of this paper is to attempt putting Pan-Africanism in proper historical context. This will be done by tackling two issues. The first is drawing attention to an aspect of the concept that is usually glossed over when the origins of Pan-Africanism are discussed. The failure to take this neglected aspect into consideration, as noted above, has done more harm than good as far as the history of Pan-Africanism is concerned. The second issue is correcting the impression that pan Africanism is virtually all about the Negroes asserting themselves before the Whites. The paper is divided into four sections, namely, introduction, exegesis of Pan Africanism, historicizing Pan-Africanism and the conclusion.

Exegesis of Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism started in the New World from where it spread to Africa, the homeland of the blacks and Europe, among Africans in the diaspora. It has a twofold aim. One of them is that it was meant to address all the things believed by the African descendants to be the reason for the dehumanization they suffered in the hands of Europeans. The other one is that it was meant to arouse a sense of brotherly solidarity in the people of African stock.⁶ This sense of brotherhood, as will be seen later, was very essential because it was the springboard for launching all that Pan-Africanism stands for.

Pan-Africanism, it has to be noted, has many sides. Esedebe alluded to this when he said that Pan-Africanism cannot be defined in one short sentence.⁷ Continuing, he said that it has constituents that mark it out. These are: Africa as the homeland of Africans and people of African descent, solidarity among men of African blood, and belief in a distinct African personality. Others are Africans must be in charge in both state and ecclesiastical matters as far as Africa is concerned, pride in African culture, rehabilitation of Africa's past and the hope for a united and glorious future Africa.⁸ It is important to note the above because some people would want to see any encounter between an African or a group of Africans with Europeans as Pan-Africanism. For such an encounter to qualify as Pan-Africanism, it must pertain to Africa and her peoples and it is for this reason that Hut Tax War and the struggles of King Jaja of Opopo, among others cannot be seen as such.⁹

In the light of the above, one can see that Pan-Africanism could not but be multi-pronged in nature. One of the dimensions is aspirational in nature. In this regard, Pan-Africanism could be seen as a blueprint that was prepared for Africa's development by the proponents of the idea. The proponents really desired to have Africa regenerated. Their plan of action revolved around having New World Africans, who as a result of their living in the Americas were equipped with "the light of science and religion"¹⁰ return to Africa to kick-start the regeneration process. Another dimension of the phenomenon is socio-cultural in nature. The name for this strand of Pan-Africanism is Ethiopianism. This strand is all about Africanizing Christianity and taking pride in Africa culture. This manifested in the formation of Black Separatist churches in the New World and independent African churches in Africa and the dropping of European names for those of Africa by the Pan-Africanists.¹¹

There is also the geographical or territorial angle to the phenomenon. As a matter of fact, this dimension gave Pan-Africanism its name. Commenting on this, Nwachukwu noted that the name was meant to describe the peculiarity of the phenomenon using its scope or territorial coverage. Thus, he said, "the name points to the characteristic of the phenomenon, namely, that it is something that pertains to Africa and cuts across it".¹² Another stand of Pan-Africanism worth mentioning is emotional in nature. Ironically, this dimension of Pan-Africanism has not been given its due status in any discussion of the origin of Pan-Africanism. Yet, it is the cornerstone of, or foundation on which the concept is built. What we are talking about here is the emotional attachment people of African descent in the New World had for themselves and Africa and everything about her.

The reason for this was because they were Africans. As seen earlier, one of the aims of Pan-Africanism was to arouse the spirit of oneness among people of African blood. It was this aforementioned love among New World Africans that galvanized them to do what they did. This love arose because of the shared historical experience of the slaves and it predates the eighteenth century. More shall be said on this in another section of this paper.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that Pan-Africanism refers to the totality of the measures taken by people of African blood as a solution to the dehumanization they suffered at the hands of the Europeans. Being something that borders on a community of issues, it means that for anything meaningful to be made of the definition of Pan-Africanism, the different facets must be incorporated. That being the case, one could say that Pan-Africanism refers to the movement of people of African descent which started in the Americas from where it spread to other parts of the world where blacks were resident, and it was meant to assuage the pains of their enslavement and/or assert themselves. It aimed at arousing the consciousness of oneness among people of African blood, addressing the issues perceived by them as being the basis for which the Europeans baited them and coming up with a strategy for moving Africa and her peoples forward.

What necessitated the movement was the ill treatment Africans received at the hands of Europeans in the New World. It is noteworthy that Africans got to the Americas as slaves whom the Europeans used as cheap labour for their agricultural, mining and other enterprises in the area. In the course of doing this work, Africans were dehumanized as the few examples given below show. For those who worked in the cotton field, their day began as soon as there was light in the morning, and continued until it was too dark to see. When the moon was full, they would labour till very late in the night. The above was coupled with poor feeding, insufficient sleep and wretched dressing.¹³ In the sugar industry, the shift extended to twenty-four (24) hours in some cases. This exposed the slaves to much danger. This was so because in the course of working for long hours, it was not unusual for the person to grow sleepy. When this happened, the slave would either be killed by the milling machine or maimed, if lucky. In the mining sector, apart from the alimentary canal related ailments associated with the mining industry which the slaves were exposed to, there were many cases of mines caving in and killing those working underground.¹⁴

Things were not any better for the New World Africans after emancipation had been proclaimed for them. This is because everywhere in the Americas, they were subjected to authorized racial discrimination. For instance, in the US, discriminatory legislation enforced segregation in the use of public convenience, access to schools, theatres, churches, residential facilities and even cemeteries. Blacks were confined to menial jobs and denied opportunities for material improvement in their life circumstances. Yet, these were made available to the poorest white immigrants from Europe.¹⁵ In the Caribbean, the Antigua legislature ruled in 1783 that every black person was a slave until legal proofs to the contrary were produced. In the West Indies, slaves who had bought their freedom lived in perpetual fear of re-enslavement. The freed slaves were 'universally insulted and robbed'. The height of the dehumanization was that blacks could not obtain justice in the law courts as the courts did not accept evidence from people of African origin.¹⁶

The reason for the unpalatable attitude of the Europeans towards Africans was the negative image the former had of the latter. This negative image was influenced by two factors. One of the two factors has to do with the slave status of the Africans. For the Europeans, slavery stripped a man of any form of human dignity he would have had. Put in another way, Africans were not seen as deserving any dignified treatment.¹⁷ The other factor has to do with the dark skin of Africans. To the Europeans dark skin was an indication of the inferiority of the blacks to the whites.¹⁸ It is necessary to state that the above position of the Europeans is misleading and a case of giving a dog a bad name in order to hang it. This is because Dr. James Africanus Horton, who addressed the matter while

responding to baits by Europeans, used his knowledge of medical science to show the hollowness of their argument.¹⁹ In addition, the dark colour of the skin of Africans is nature's way of adjusting Africans properly to their environment as it offers them protection from the bright sunlight and heat of Africa.²⁰ From the foregoing, it is clear that the Europeans stopped at nothing to justify the ill treatment of the blacks. On their part, the blacks did not take things lying low as they did everything within their reach to fight back. This is what has come to be known as Pan-Africanism. When and how this started are addressed below.

Historicizing Pan-Africanism

To be able to place Pan-Africanism in proper historical context, certain issues must be borne in mind. The first is that Pan-Africanism is a term used for the totality of the reaction of New World Africans to the ill treatment and bait of the Europeans. This reaction, it is important to note, has many strands, as has been shown above. The second issue is that tracing the origin of Pan-Africanism to when the notions underlying it came into prominence or became articulated²¹ is misleading. This is because doing so will cut off aspects of the history of the phenomenon. The point being made is that when something becomes prominent or articulated cannot be when it started. After all, that something has become prominent or articulated simply means that that thing which has been going on unannounced or which has not been made clear has come to light or has become clear. The third point to note is that Pan-Africanism did not come in one fell swoop fashion. Rather, circumstances determined the choice of what the African descendants used in their response. In the same vein, the tenor of their response was determined by circumstances as we shall see later.

Though there is the tendency to see Pan-Africanism as something of the 18th and 19th centuries as noted in the preamble, it is necessary to state that that position is inaccurate. As a matter of fact, notions underlying the phenomenon predate the 18th century. However, those notions were not obvious to the outside world because they were emotional in nature. This was the issue of the slaves seeing themselves as one. As an oppressed group, though they could not help their situation, and were implicitly obedient to their owners who had power of life and death over them,²² they could not be stopped from having a new line of thought about themselves. This had to do with the slaves seeing their interests as essentially the same and acting accordingly. The significance of the aforementioned new thought among the slaves lies in the fact that while in Africa as free men and women, they felt no qualms fighting one another or working against the interests of one another. This was why people of the same stock fought against one another as exemplified by the cases of the Wolof's and other Mande groups and the Yoruba.²³ There were also cases where one African group sided with the Europeans against another African group.²⁴ This lack of unity among African peoples created room for their enslavement in the Americas. It is noteworthy that this new spirit among people of African origin provided the springboard for launching what constitutes Pan-Africanism. Indeed, it was the gun power that was ignited to start the conflagration. According to Conniff and Davis, this new spirit started in the early days of slavery. Continuing they said it brought about a strong bond among the slaves.²⁵ Adabayo's work gives us an insight into why the New World Africans did what they did. According to him, a sense of solidarity greatly influences the feelings and behaviours of members towards one another on the one hand, and towards others on the other. Continuing, he deposed that the feelings are usually of a favourable kind towards the members of the group while the reverse is the case, when it relates to those outside the group.²⁶ This solidarity, it should be noted, was provoked by the oppression of the African Americans.²⁷ Yet, it was in the main, not assertive because of the situation of things with the slaves.²⁸

The tenor of the response of the people of African origin, however, changed from sometime in the 18th century. One of the reasons for this was that the number of slave's vis-a-vis that of the Europeans was increasing in an appreciable way. This encouraged slave revolts which made Europeans to panic. Another reason was that the

success of the Haiti revolution emboldened the Africans while at the same time, made Europeans jittery: the 1833 Emancipation Act, for instance, was an outcome of the fear that overcame the British.²⁹ Finally, the slaves wanted to consolidate on the gains they had made during this period. That is, they did not want to go back to the harrowing days of slavery. As a result, they did everything within their reach as shown in the activities of the African Lodge, Harriet Tubman of underground railroad road fame and the organizers of the Pan-African Congresses of 1893 and 1895 in Chicago and Atlanta respectively,³⁰ among others. As a matter of fact, what the New World Africans did at this time gave prominence to the phenomenon and made some people to erroneously trace its origin to that period.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be seen that what happened in the 18th and 19th centuries were a change in the tenor of Pan-Africanism and not the beginning of the phenomenon. The foundation of the phenomenon was laid in the new attitude of the people of African origin discussed above and that developed because of their shared historical experiences.

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