Pan-Africanism

INTRODUCTION

Pan-Africanism, philosophy that is based on the belief that African people share common bonds and objectives and that advocates unity to achieve these objectives. In the views of different proponents throughout its history, Pan-Africanism has been conceived in varying ways. It has been applied to all black African people and people of black African descent; to all people on the African continent, including nonblack people; or to all states on the African continent.

The formal concept of Pan-Africanism initially developed outside of Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It developed as a reaction to the impact of European colonialism in Africa on peoples of African descent. In the mid-20th century, activists in Africa adopted Pan-Africanism as a rallying cry for independence from colonial rule. Some African Pan-Africanists sought to unite the continent as one independent nation. From these origins and objectives, Pan-Africanism developed in two basic forms. In one form, known as Continental Pan-Africanism, it advocates the unity of states and peoples within Africa, either through political union or through international cooperation. In its other, broader form, known as Diaspora Pan-Africanism, it relates to solidarity among all black Africans and peoples of black African descent outside the African continent. Developed and interpreted by thinkers, authors, and activists around the world, Pan-Africanism remains a significant force in global politics and thought.

BACKGROUND

European contact with sub-Saharan Africa began in the mid-15th century, when the Portuguese established a thriving trade on Africa's western coast. By the end of the century, in addition to buying items such as pepper, gold, and ivory, the Portuguese were buying increasing numbers of African slaves. The Portuguese were followed by slave traders and colonists from Britain and, later, France. In the 16th century the expansion of agricultural plantation economies in new European colonies in North and South America and the Caribbean made African slavery exceedingly profitable. European demand for African slaves increased, and more and more Africans were enslaved by West and Central African slave traders and taken from Africa. *See* Atlantic Slave Trade.

Early European trade in Africa was accompanied from its very beginning by European attempts to seize territory from African states in order to secure control of the sources of the goods they were purchasing. After conquering territory, European colonialists set out to control the African population for use as inexpensive labor in plantations, mines, and other flourishing businesses established in the African colonies. In this way, the first contacts of European traders with Africa marked the beginning of European domination of African peoples.

Colonialism systematically degraded Africans, both slaves and residents of Europe's African colonies. Slaves labored under cruel and dehumanizing conditions for no pay or extremely low wages. Furthermore, these slaves were scattered in far-flung European colonies, separated from their African homes and relatives. From the mid-15th century to the late 19th century, an estimated 6 percent of Africans in the slave trade were taken to the British territory that became the United States; 17 percent were sent to Spanish territory in North and South America; 40 percent to European-held islands in the Caribbean Sea; and 38 percent to Portuguese territory in South America. This dispersion of African peoples is known as the African Diaspora. The term *Diaspora* also refers to these dispersed peoples' descendents, who largely compose the present-day population of people of African descent outside of Africa.

Africans in the African colonies were indoctrinated with the notion of the inherent supremacy of European culture through everyday interaction with Europeans and through the few colonial schools Europeans established. The political systems of the indigenous African peoples were transformed, as traditional African rulers were usually forced to act as pawns of the colonial administration. Colonialism also had a major economic impact on Africans, as agricultural commodities, minerals, and people were usually exported from the African colonies to Europe and the New World rather than being used for the direct benefit of Africans. Roads, bridges, ports, and other facilities were built only to facilitate this export trade.

Slavery and the colonial system were hated by Africans and were institutions that the Pan-African movement arose to combat. Pan-Africanism also developed to overcome the obstacles facing the African Diaspora—a scattered, diverse, and often disadvantaged population of people of African descent. Pan-African thinkers would maintain that, although they were dispersed throughout the

world, African people and people of African descent were a unified people and should try to work together for the good of all.

DEVELOPMENT OF PAN-AFRICANISM

Africans resisted European domination from their earliest contacts with Europeans. The record of this resistance is present in the early communications between the rulers of African states and the monarchs of Europe in the 17th century, as well as in the routine physical resistance of Africans to slavery from the beginning of the slave trade. Modern resistance to colonialism, however, began with the development of a formal Pan-African movement at the dawn of the 20th century. In 1900 Henry Sylvester Williams, a lawyer from the Caribbean island of Trinidad, organized a Pan-African conference in London to give black people the opportunity to discuss issues facing blacks around the world. The conference attracted a small but significant representation of Africans and people of African descent from the Caribbean and the United States, as well as whites from Britain.

The original political objective of the meeting was to protest the unequal treatment of blacks in the British colonies as well as in Britain. However, the speakers also used the forum to make statements about the needs to uphold the dignity of African peoples worldwide and to provide them with education and other social services. In addition, speakers at the conference celebrated aspects of traditional African culture and pointed out great historical achievements of African peoples in the tradition of influential Pan-African pioneer Edward Wilmot Blyden. Blyden, a Caribbean-born Liberian educator, wrote extensively in the late 19th century about the positive accomplishments of Africans and may have coined the term *Pan-Africanism.*

The next several Pan-African meetings were organized by distinguished African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The consequences of World War I (1914-1918) raised serious concerns among blacks in the United States. The main issues were the well-being of African American and African soldiers who had served in the war and the status of former German colonial territories in Africa that had been captured during the war by Britain, France, and other Allied powers. Du Bois convened the first Pan-African Congress in Paris in 1919. The congress was held at the same time as the Paris Peace Conference, at which European powers negotiated the aftermath of the war.

The agenda of the first Pan-African Congress resembled that of the 1900 conference in its concern for the plight of Africans and people of African descent. Significant emphasis was placed on the provision of education for Africans and the need for greater African participation in the affairs of the colonies. Specific interest in the African territories of the conquered German colonial empire was also expressed. A proposal was made that these territories be held in trust by the newly founded League of Nations with the goal of granting the territories self-determination as soon as possible. Nevertheless, the territories were placed under the nominal supervision of the league, which distributed the territories to other European colonial powers without demanding that the new colonial rulers move the territories toward self-determination.

The next Pan-African congresses sponsored by Du Bois were held in 1921 (in London, Paris, and Brussels, Belgium), 1923 (in London and Lisbon, Portugal), and 1927 (in New York City). These congresses were attended by increasing numbers of representatives from the United States, Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. Several important factors affected the growing popularity of the congresses. First, many delegates were sponsored by international labor movements, which were growing in size and power in the 1920s. A second factor was the growth of the black nationalist movement of Marcus Garvey. The Garvey movement was important in the United States as a popular expression of the sentiments of African unity and redemption among working-class blacks. His followers contrasted with the more elite black groups cultivated by Du Bois. Garvey, a Jamaican, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914 to promote black pride, political and economic improvements for blacks everywhere, and the repatriation of blacks to Africa (often called the “Back to Africa” movement).

The institutional growth of the Garvey movement was swift and international in scope. Garvey’s newspaper, the *Negro World,* achieved wide distribution, and chapters of UNIA sprung up all over the Americas, as well as in Europe, Australia, and South Africa. Garvey also established a steamship company, the Black Star Line, with which he hoped both to enter international trade and to transport blacks to Africa. Garvey hoped to oversee the repatriation of tens of thousands of American blacks to the West African nation of Liberia, which had been founded by freed American slaves in the early 19th century. The Garvey movement declined when Garvey was arrested and imprisoned in 1925 on charges of mail fraud relating to the operation of the Black Star Line, and his repatriation scheme was never fulfilled.

Influenced by Garvey's ideas, young Africans studying in London founded the West African Student Union (WASU) in the late 1920s. WASU became a focal point for younger, more politically aggressive blacks from Africa and the Caribbean who agitated for African independence from colonialism.

In the late 1920s and the 1930s, public awareness of the plight of peoples of African descent grew as black cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance in the United States gained recognition. The Harlem Renaissance, centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, disseminated the works of black writers such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Du Bois himself, along with other black artists espousing black pride and challenging racial injustice. In France, a similar movement, called the négritude movement, followed the Harlem Renaissance. The movement developed in Paris among French-speaking African intellectuals and activists whose works affirmed the integrity of African civilization, defending it against charges of African inferiority. Noted proponents of négritude included the authors Léopold Sédar Senghor (who later became the first president of Senegal), Aimé Césaire, Alioune Diop, and Léon-Gontran Damas.

IV AFRICAN INDEPENDENCE

In the 1930s and 1940s, global forces such as the Great Depression (the worldwide economic slump of the 1930s) and the development and onset of World War II significantly hampered the efforts of the Pan-African movement. Nevertheless, concern for Africa among people of African descent remained strong in the United States and Britain. American and British Pan-African groups mounted substantial protests when Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935. In 1937 African American groups formed the Council on African Affairs, the first American lobby organization led by blacks. The council worked to raise awareness in the United States about the plight of Africans living under colonialism and advocated the liberation of African colonies. It was headed by the internationally renowned black singer and film star Paul Robeson and included such important black scholars and activists as W. E. B. Du Bois, educator Alphaeus Hunton, future congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and educator Mary McLeod Bethune. The council also attracted African American artists such as singer and actor Lena Horne, who helped raise funds for projects.

In the early 1940s Kwame Nkrumah, a native of the British-ruled Gold Coast (now Ghana) in West Africa, founded the African Student Organization in the United States. At the time, Nkrumah was a student in the United States. In 1944 Nkrumah left America for London, where he joined an important group of Pan-Africanists led by Jamaican activist George Padmore and Trinidadian author C. L. R. James. Also in the group were Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Hastings Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, who, like Nkrumah, would eventually become leaders of their countries. In 1945 this group sponsored the fifth Pan-African Congress, which brought together numerous African nationalists and trade unionists. The meeting, held in Manchester, England, gave great impetus to the movement for African independence and fostered African leadership of the Pan-African movement.

In 1957 Ghana became the first sub-Saharan African state to gain independence, and Nkrumah became its first prime minister. Nkrumah held the Pan-Africanist view that the independence of Ghana would be incomplete without the independence of all of Africa. To work toward this goal, he appointed Padmore to establish a Pan-African Secretariat within the Ghanaian government. The secretariat pursued the twin goals of total African independence and continental political union in two series of international conferences, held between 1958 and 1961: First, the All-African Peoples' Conferences were held to stimulate independence movements in other African colonies. Second, Nkrumah organized the Conferences of Independent African States to establish a diplomatic framework for the political union of Africa. By inviting representatives from independent North African states to the conferences and by holding the 1961 All-African Peoples' Conference in Cairo, Egypt, Nkrumah's intent was clearly to unite the entire African continent.

In 1960 Nkrumah invited W. E. B. Du Bois to live in Ghana to act as an adviser and to initiate a project that Du Bois had proposed, the *Encyclopedia Africana*, a comprehensive encyclopedia of the culture and history of African peoples. Du Bois died in Ghana in 1963 with this project incomplete. However, the publication of several books during this period made Continental Pan-African philosophy more widely known. Notable among these books were Padmore's *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* (1956) and Nkrumah's *Africa Must Unite* (1963).

In 1960, 17 African countries gained independence. By the end of 1963, approximately 80 percent of the African continent was independent. Nkrumah's goal of establishing a United States of Africa with a centralized power structure was opposed by the leaders of many of the new African countries, who resisted giving up their nations' newfound autonomy. In May 1963 representatives from 32 African nations of both North and sub-Saharan Africa met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and

founded the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now African Union) as a loose federation of independent African states committed to continent-wide cooperation. The unfinished African independence movement, political differences among the independent nations, and the poverty of the African continent kept political union from becoming a reality.

V PAN-AFRICANISM AND CIVIL RIGHTS

The concept of Pan-Africanism as a political force reemerged in the Diaspora with the beginning of the Black Power movement in the United States. In the early 1960s Malcolm X, a charismatic and forceful leader of a black Muslim group called the Nation of Islam, began publicly to espouse an aggressive philosophy of racial unity and self-reliance that came to be known as Black Power (or black nationalism). In 1966 civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael became head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an influential civil rights organization, and then led SNCC and other groups to adopt Black Power as a guiding principle. In the United States, Pan-Africanism came to be regarded as the international expression of Black Power and Malcolm X as the American voice of Pan-Africanism.

In early 1964 Malcolm X traveled to Africa, giving well-received speeches to the governments and universities of Ghana and Nigeria. In his talks, Malcolm X expressed the theme of Pan-African unity by declaring that American blacks would not be free as long as they experienced racism in America and as long as Africa was not free. On a second trip to Africa later that year, Malcolm X became the first black American to speak before the OAU. On that occasion he asked for the assistance of African leaders in bringing charges of racism by the American government before the United Nations (UN). (The charges were never heard before the UN.) Back in the United States, Malcolm X counseled American blacks to acknowledge their kinship to Africa as a part of the civil rights movement.

V LATER DEVELOPMENTS I

Several Pan-African organizations formed in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of these was the African Liberation Support Committee, headed by activist Howard Fuller (who later took the name Owusu Sadaukai), renowned poet Amiri Baraka, black scholar and activist Maulana Karenga, and other prominent African Americans. This organization worked to increase support within the United States for liberation movements in Africa and promoted the observance of May 25 as African Liberation Day, a holiday established by the OAU to mark its birth. These projects became the instruments through which black Americans supported the growing revolutions in southern Africa by black Africans seeking to achieve independence in Rhodesia (later named Zimbabwe) and in South-West Africa (Namibia) and majority rule in South Africa.

Another major event of this period was the sixth Pan-African Congress, held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in June 1974 and headed by Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere. The meeting drew an international delegation of more than 5,000 Africans and people of African descent, including 100 from the United States. However, it revealed a growing schism within the movement between Marxist and non-Marxist political alliances and approaches to issues. Thus, the achievements of this meeting were few.

Between 1974 and 1980 the Pan-African movement welcomed the independence of the last European colonies in Africa. By raising public awareness and putting pressure on their governments throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Pan-African groups around the world succeeded in focusing the world’s attention on the injustices of white minority rule in Namibia and South Africa.

VI THE LEGACY OF PAN-AFRICANISM I

Continental Pan-Africanism continues to surface as a strategy for addressing the problems of Africa, notably in the form of regional cooperative groups. Examples of these are the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC, formerly the Southern African Development Coordination Council), which are trade blocs that have played significant roles in regional economic integration. With the increasing pressure of economic competition from international trade blocs in North America, Europe, and Asia, the achievement of economic and political unity on the African continent remains a viable and urgent quest.

Peoples of black African descent around the world face a number of similar socioeconomic and political challenges as they strive to create better futures for themselves and their descendants. These peoples' international cooperation and shared strategies for bringing about social change are the legacy of Diaspora Pan-Africanism.