



## PAN-AFRICANISM AND NEGRITUDE

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### Abstract

Decolonisation of Africa was not left to the colonial subjects alone, for the black diaspora (descendants of African slaves) in the West Indies and the United States also participated in it. The two groups played a major role in freeing the continent from the shackles of colonialism. They combined forces under two intellectual movements, namely Pan-Africanism and Negritude. Pan-Africanism is a worldwide movement for unity and solidarity among Africans in Africa and people of African descent in the New World, while Negritude is a literary, cultural movement that began among French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in [Paris](#) as a protest against French colonial rule; and while Pan-Africanism spun off from the agitation for racial equality by the black diaspora in the New World and was widely popular in the English colonies, Negritude was triggered by France's Assimilation policy and was widely popular in the French colonies. Efforts to achieve sustainable unity among African countries are bedevilled by their heritage of colonial fault lines. This paper discusses the two nationalist movements which, inadvertently, helped lay the foundations of the Anglophone-Francophone rivalry that militates against African unity. After more than six decades of independence, Africa is expected to have outgrown the unintended schism created by these two anti-colonial movements.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation, Africa, Colonialism, Pan-Africanism, Negritude.

### Introduction

Colonial rule inadvertently created a very strong bond between Africans in Africa and people of African descent in the United States and the West Indies; so, it was like the bee that pollinates the flower it robs. While the Atlantic slave trade uprooted millions of men, women and children from their ancestral homes on the continent and deported them to the New World, colonial rule brutally exploited the continent's human and natural resources. For various reasons, the number of deportees might remain unknown. This is because "any figure of Africans imported into the Americas which is narrowly based on the surviving records is bound to be low, because there were so many people at the time who had a vested interest in smuggling slaves (and withholding data)" (Rodney, 2009). Nonetheless, Onwubiko (1980) puts the number at about 10 million. The continent still bears the scars of these two experiences. About the impact of the slave trade, Rodney (2009) writes: "When one tries to measure the effect of European slave trading on the African continent, it is very essential to realise that one is measuring the effect of social violence rather than trade in any normal sense of the word." Prior to colonial rule, contact between blacks in Africa and people of African descent in Europe and the New World was minimal.

This paper discusses Pan-Africanism and Negritude---the two intellectual movements that unified Africans in Africa and descendants of African slaves in the New World against colonial rule.



## **Pan-Africanism**

Pan-Africanism has been defined in so many different ways. According to Legume (1966), it is “the expression of a desire for African unity... an expression of a sense of unity between all peoples whose ancestors originally came from Africa.” Kuryla (n.d.) defines it thus:

Pan-Africanism, the idea that peoples of African descent have common interests and should be unified. Historically, Pan-Africanism has often taken the shape of a political or cultural movement. There are many varieties of Pan-Africanism. In its narrowest political manifestation, Pan-Africanists envision a unified African nation where all people of the African diaspora can live. (*African diaspora* refers to the long-term historical process by which people of African descent have been scattered from their ancestral homelands to other parts of the world.) In more-general terms, Pan-Africanism is the sentiment that people of African descent have a great deal in common, a fact that deserves notice and even celebration.

Olusanya (1984) defines it as “an emotional and intellectual reaction on the part of peoples of African descent against the inhuman treatment, degradation, injustice, oppression and alienation they suffered in a predominantly white society or society though no predominantly white, but whose dominant values were western--societies which looked upon Africans and peoples of African descent as sub-humans.”

## **Origins of Pan-Africanism**

Agitation against racial discrimination in the New World, particularly in the United States, was one of the factors that inspired nationalism in Africa. In fact, that agitation for racial equality inspired Pan-Africanism. Pan Africanism started in the West Indies and the United States (Du Bois, 2007; Webster & Boahen, 1967). According to Du Bois (2007), “[t]he idea of one Africa to unite the thought and ideals of all native peoples of the dark continent belongs to the twentieth century and stems naturally from the West Indies and the United States.” Webster and Boahen (1967) assert: “The elite of Africa and the new world began to feel that the elevation of the race must be an international effort, that a victory of Negroes over segregation in America was as important as a victory over colonialism in Africa. Many felt that a black man could not carry himself with dignity, no matter what his degree of freedom, as long as brother members of his race were being humiliated elsewhere in the world.” It is believed to have been started in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by Martin Delany and Alexander Crummel (both African-Americans) and Edward Blyden (a West Indian). Believing that African Americans could not prosper alongside whites, Delany urged blacks to separate from the United States and form their own country. Crummel and Blyden supported the idea that blacks in the New World should found their own nation but not in the New World; rather they should return to Africa where they should convert and civilize the natives. Its goal was “to create a common identity between Africans and Africans in diaspora in order to achieve unity of purpose” (Olusanya, 1984).

Why did it start in the New World, and not in Africa? This is Legum’s answer to the question:

The reason for Pan-Africanism having its root outside Africa itself are [?] easy to understand. The descendants of the Negro slaves in the New World felt they had been made 'homeless' by their transfer to foreign countries and objection to alien cultures. They felt they did 'belong' to the New World. They felt themselves as the orphans of Africa aliens and strangers in a world of white people who were chiefly interested only in their labour on the plantations and hardly at all in their personality as men. Thus, they felt themselves 'black outcasts', robbed of their dignity as



human beings, and with no claim to being 'of equal value in the sight of God'. What distinguished them from other men was only one thing: their colour. Because they were black they were regarded as inferior. While many Negroes passively accepted their place as 'bottom dogs' in a white world, others did not (1966, 528).

By the end of the Second World War, Africans from the continent had taken over the Pan-Africanist movement, as evidenced by the fact that leading participants in the Pan-African conference held in Manchester in 1945 were Africans from Africa (Legum, 1966).

Henry Sylvester Williams from Trinidad is regarded as the father of Pan-Africanism. He coined the term *Pan African* and organised the first Pan-African Conference held in 1900 at Westminster Town Hall, London. Attendees came from Africa, America, and the West Indies. Most of them were studying in England at the time of the conference. Earlier in 1897 after relocating from the United States and Canada where he had gone for further education he founded the African Association to "promote and protect the interests of all subjects claiming African descent, wholly or in part, in British colonies and other place, especially Africa, by circulating accurate information on all subjects affecting their rights and privileges as subjects of the British Empire, by direct appeals to the Imperial and local Governments" (Wikipedia).

William E. Burghardt Du Bois from United States attended the 1900 Pan African conference organized by Williams. For his immense contribution to the Pan-Africanist movement, he has been called "the father of modern Pan-Africanism". He was vehemently opposed to the 'Atlanta Compromise'. Booker T. Washington, whose speech on 18 September 1895 gave birth to the 'Atlanta Compromise', had proposed that the blacks should accept superiority of the whites, while seeking social advancement through vocational education, practical trades and industrial occupations, rather than higher education. On the contrary, Du Bois "believed that white Americans must be forced to grant full equality to coloured Americans. He felt that if the coloured people did not resist segregation and agitate for equality they would gradually come to accept the American caste system normal and inevitable" (Wesbter&Boahen, 1967, 299-300). According to Kuryla (n.d.), "[h]is statement, made at the turn of the 20th century, that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" was made with Pan-Africanist sentiments in mind." He was one of the organisers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He organised four Pan-African Congresses: in Paris (1919), in London and Brussels (1921), in London and Lisbon (1923) and in New York (1927). According to Ohene (2021), "His role in establishing the Pan-African Congresses in the early 1900s and his agitation for an end to colonialism made him an inspiration to many African leaders." He opposed Marcus Garvey's view that blacks in the New World should return to Africa. In 1961 (when he was 93 years old) he and his wife (Shirley) relocated to Ghana at the invitation of President Kwame Nkrumah and lived there until his death two years later. He switched nationality five months before his death after the United States refused to renew his passport. On being conferred with Ghanaian citizenship, he said, "I have returned so that my remains may mingle with the dust of the forefathers." He glorified the colour black, exhorting blacks to "forget the white gods" and to adopt a black Christ and a black Madonna. His slogans were 'Africa for Africans,' 'the renaissance of the black race' and 'Ethiopia awake'.

Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey was another great prophet of Pan-Africanism. He was of the radical view that the political salvation of Negroes in the New World lay in their returning to Africa. He founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and exhorted blacks in



the diaspora to return to Africa. To actualize his plan to help black Americans emigrate to Africa, he established the Black Star Shipping Line, hoping to use it to “transport Negroes back home” as well as sent a mission to Liberia “to negotiate settlement of 20,000-30,000 American coloured families who would be helped to emigrate to Liberia, presumably to be the spearhead for the liberation of Africa” (Webster &Boahen, 1967). He used his *Negro World* journal to propagate his views. He was jailed in 1925 and subsequently deported back to Jamaica. He died in London in 1940.

It should be noted that Pan-Africanism was more popular than Negritude in the English-speaking colonies in Africa.

## Negritude

Negritude was a protest philosophy that opposed France's policy of Assimilation. These two different approaches to the decolonisation of Africa appears to have created the fault lines and discordance we see today between English-speaking Africans and their French-speaking brothers.

Negritude which was originated by Africans in the French-speaking African colonies and blacks in the West Indies was targeted at Assimilation the policy whereby France attempted to Frenchify natives in its colonies. Leopold Sedar Senghor, one of its founding fathers, described it as “the whole complex of civilized values cultural, economic, social, and political which characterize the black peoples, or, more precisely, the Negro African world.” It had a narrower perspective than Pan-Africanism in that while the latter pursued unity of blacks in addition to the independence of Africa, the former restrictively attacked France’s colonial policy of Assimilation by which the French who “assumed that their civilization and culture had attained the highest possible standard “set out to impose this standard on other nations whose civilizations they considered to be inferior to their own” (Webster &Boahen, 1967). According to Webster and Boahen (1967), “Cultural Assimilation was justified in the past by the French on the wrong grounds that Africans had no history or culture of their own. Negritude set out to demonstrate that, on the contrary, Africans had contributed and were still contributing to world civilization as a whole. Thus, Negritude was originally an African cultural nationalist movement against the political, and especially cultural, domination of Europe”(275). The British used Indirect Rule, the French Assimilation/Association, the Portuguese Paternalism. Whereas the British sought physical colonization, the French sought cultural colonization that encourage miscegenation and assisted migration to the Mother Country as well as political representation in the legislature. In a speech made at Oxford University in 1961, Senghor (1961) opined:

Paradoxically, it was the French who first forced us to seek its essence, and who then showed us where it lay when they enforced their policy of assimilation and thus deepened our despair. Earlier, we had become aware within ourselves that assimilation was a failure; we could assimilate mathematics or the French language, but we could never strip off our black skins or root out black souls. And so we set out on a fervent quest for the 'holy grail': our collective soul. And we came upon it. Negritude is the whole complex of civilized values cultural, economic, social, and political which characterize the black peoples, or, more precisely, the Negro African world.

What is Negritude? It was a “literary movement of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s that began among French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in Paris as a protest against French colonial rule and the policy of assimilation”(Encyclopaedia Britannica). It was originated by Léopold Sédar



Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas and was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, “a literary and artistic flowering that emerged among a group of Black thinkers and artists (including novelists and poets) in the United States, in New York City, during the 1920s” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Senghor (quoted in Sigmund, 1967) defines it as “the whole complex of civilized values--- cultural, economic, social, and political--- which characterize the black peoples, or, more precisely, the Negro African world.” It had two phases. The first was racist in that it stressed the essential unity of black people; the second was anti-racist in that it stressed the unity of all humanity (Legum, 1966). Senghor, the founding president of Senegal (1960-1980), is widely regarded as the father of Negritude. It is important to note that Negritude was parochially restricted to the French-speaking colonies in Africa.

## Conclusion

The different policies adopted by the colonial powers created different challenges for the natives. In those colonies under British rule, the natives contended with Indirect Rule whereby the colonialists largely used the traditional chieftaincy institutions for administration. Those in the French colonies contended against Assimilation whereby the colonialists sought the racial remoulding of the natives into French. Africans in the Belgian colonies contended against Paternalism---the policy that treated the natives as children suffering from protracted infancy. Pan-Africanism has its origins in the struggle for racial equality by African Americans during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Negritude was a protest philosophy that opposed France's policy of Assimilation. These two different approaches to the decolonisation of Africa, unfortunately, appears to have created the fault lines and discordance we see today between English-speaking Africans and their French-speaking brothers. Negritude and Pan Africanism were united in their agitation for the independence of Africa. As for their major differences, whereas Negritude was popular among French-speaking Africans and Negroes in the French-speaking in West Indies---Martinique, Guyana, etc., Pan-Africanism was popular in the English-speaking countries and colonies.

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