



Lecture 06

Pan-Africanism

I. What is Pan-Africanism?

Pan-Africanism is a movement that was established to unite Black people around the world against colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy. The movement is based on the belief that all Black people share the same cultural background, i.e., African, therefore share the same identity.

Historically, Pan-Africanism was founded in the USA during the 19th century and then spread to the rest of the world, mainly the African continent, in the 20th century.

Note

The prefix 'Pan' is of a Greek origin and it means 'all' and 'all-inclusive.'

II. The History of Pan-Africanism

By the turn of the 19th century, white Americans showed concern over the rising number of free African Americans and feared their possible rebellion against slavery. As a solution, freed Black Americans were moved to Africa by the American Colonisation Society - which was founded in 1816. Despite the conflicted views, the aim of this Society was to provide African Americans with a place where they can live free of racial discrimination. The move to Africa was supported by a number of African-American intellectuals who assumed that the only way for Black Americans to be free is for them to be back to Africa. By the end of the 19th century, the first ideas of Pan-Africanism started to form.

1. Pan-Africanism in the USA

Due to the long period that Pan-Africanism covered in the USA, it was continuously defined and redefined according to the beliefs and thoughts of the main intellectual figures dominating the scene at the time. With each new definition of the movement, a new understanding of the relationship between the USA and Africa is formed.

- Edward W. Blyden (1832-1912): Blyden is from Caribbean origins who, along with Martin Delany, believed in the common destiny of Black people. However, due to the influence of Christian teachings on these figures, their aim to return to Africa was to ‘civilise’ its inhabitants. During the end of the 19th century, some African- American intellectuals considered educating Africans and converting them to Christianity as their mission.
- Marcus Garvey (1887-1940): Taking after Blyden and his belief in the common destiny of Black people, Garvey tried to unite Black Americans on the basis of their race despite their class status. Through his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and his belief in racial solidarity and pride in one’s African origins, he started a ‘Back to Africa’ campaign. To do so, Garvey launched a shipping line—the Black Star Line—to transport African Americans who wanted to go back to Africa. This process, however, proved to be a failure after the majority of Black Americans could not assimilate in African communities, which led Garvey to support the assimilation of African Americans in the American society while still celebrating their African heritage.
- W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963): Unlike Garvey, Du Bois supported the integration and assimilation of African Americans in the American society, while at the same time calling for the end of oppression against all Black people around the world. In the second Pan-African Congress in 1921, Du Bois was the first member to bring Africa and colonialism to the forefront as he argued that Africa should be ruled by its own people instead of African-Americans leaders—as called for by previous members. Due to his inclusive views and arguments about racial equality, Du Bois is considered the father of modern Pan-Africanism as his ideas have become the movement’s philosophical and practical foundations.

2. Pan-Africanism in Africa

Since 1900, Pan-Africanism advocates organised and held various conferences across North America and Europe to raise awareness about the struggles Black people go through because of white supremacy. It was only in 1945, in the Pan-African Congress of Manchester, that African leaders joined the movement. Since this point, the movement has been ‘Africanised,’ as Africa and colonialism became the centre of the movement.

- Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972): Nkrumah, who later became the first president of independent Ghana in 1957, was one of the African leaders who shaped the African side of Pan-Africanism. Influenced by the movement’s African-American pioneers and their ideas, Nkrumah stressed the importance of the African unity as a means towards liberation from colonialism. He aspired to form the United States of Africa that would be united on the political, economic, and social levels. However, by forcing one perspective on all African nations, Nkrumah downplayed the local differences and problems of each African region.

III. Pan-African Literature

1. Trans-Atlantic/African Unity

As a movement, Pan-Africanism focused on the importance of creating a sense of unity between Africans themselves and with those in the diaspora. With the possibilities that can result from this unity, debates on this issue and on forming a real/imaginative united Black country have become a common theme in Pan-African narratives.

2. Pride in African Cultures

While writers from the diaspora (USA, Europe and Caribbean) used stories of returning to motherland Africa as their way of reconnecting with African cultures, African writers turned their focus to reviving their local traditions, myths, and beliefs.

IV. Pan-Africanism Now!

With African nations securing independence in the 1960s and 1970s and African Americans gaining their civil rights in the USA, the unity between these two communities that Pan-Africanism called for has become a mere metaphorical relationship. For those in the diaspora, Africa now is just a “home”

that they will never return to. The failure of Pan-Africanism movement (Falola & Essien, 2013) can be attributed to two main reasons:

1. Nationalism

After the end of colonialism, the newly independent African nations started to focus on their own local problems, such as civil wars, economic collapse, and health issues. Africans and those of African descent in the diaspora no longer have a shared enemy (colonialism and white supremacy) that they need to unite to fight against.

2. The Failure of New Organisations

After the first signs of the movement's failure, African leaders attempted to form new organisations like the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the African Union (AU) to take its place. However, these organisations failed to see beyond the continent's political problems. In other words, the new African organisations and African leaders ignored the new forms of economic and social oppression applied on Black people around the world.

V. Neo-colonialism and Globalisation

The new forms of oppression that Black people, especially Africans, struggle with are neo-colonialism and globalisation. Neo-colonialism is mainly economic as the wealth of the newly free African countries is controlled by the former colonial powers and the USA. In Frantz Fanon's (1967) words, neo-colonialism maintains the economic dependence of the African nations on Western decisions. This control is achieved through organisations like the Commonwealth (Anglophone regions controlled by Britain), World Bank, and International Monetary Funding (IMF).

Globalisation, on the other hand, is considered as a new form of colonialism. Unlike colonialism, globalisation is indirect and subtle as it controls how people from the peripheries think about their own cultures. For example, speaking in English and wearing from Western fashion brands is now considered the way to prove a person's worth, while those who hold to their own native languages and cultures are commonly viewed as uneducated and uncivilised.

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