

The Diaspora and the Pan-African Discourse: A Study of George Padmore

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Abstract

The paper, “The Diaspora and the Pan-African Discourse: A Study of George Padmore” examines the role of George Padmore in the development of the Pan-African Movement from the diaspora to Africa. The race relations in the New World and the imposition of colonial rule in Africa both summed the basis for the aggregation of a global Africa. The paper observes that the children of freed slaves in the Americas and Europe were attracted by the dehumanizing and discriminating experiences during and after the abolition of the Slave trade to restore the dignity of Blacks with their integration into the mainstream of the New World. These highly cerebral and politically sophisticated elite of which Padmore is one, incorporated anti-colonial activism in the series of Pan-African conferences held. However, the anti-colonial activism of Padmore was impeded by some challenges like, paucity of funds, physical and mental exhaustion, and alienation by supposed Pan-Africanists. In any case, the diaspora played significant role in the anti-colonial activities in Africa.

Key Words: Africa, Blacks, Diaspora, New World, Padmore, Pan-Africanism, Slave trade

Introduction

The presence of Africans in the New World is largely as a result of the trans-Atlantic Slave trade.

Pan-Africanism scholars conceptualized Pan-Africanism in terms of ideology, race and class- the struggle by the Africans in Africa and in the New World to be treated with dignity as humans, and class has to do with elitist composition of the Pan-Africanists who were highly cerebral individuals trained in the United States and Europe.

Sekou Touré opines that,

Pan-Africanism is the struggle of the masses among the Africans and their brothers abroad. If we are not fully conscious of this we shall be led into the

confusion which imperialism is certain to exploit. Pan-Africanism, as a collective movement against imperialist oppression, is an expression of the will to unite by African Peoples, and their determination to cease to be the passive objects of history and become its subjects (Sekour Touré in Poe 55).

Sekou Touré associates the development of Pan-Africanism with Africa’s ancient splendor, cultural richness and dignified relationships with other peoples of the world. This culture developed harmoniously to the highest level of

human knowledge through its languages, philosophical systems, religions, science and technics. "The African Peoples have known how to elaborate themselves and how to perfect unceasingly principles and methods of action" (Touré, *Revolution-culture and Pan-African...* 167).

Nkrumah conceives Pan-Africanism essentially as an objective to be reached rather than a method of operation or a cultural character trait. From Conakry Nkrumah wrote to freedom fighters throughout the world describing Pan-Africanism as the true dimensions of the African Revolution. These dimensions were:

- i. National liberation for national reconstruction;
- ii. National reconstruction to promote democracy and prosperity for the broad masses; and
- iii. All-African struggle against colonialism and all new manifestations of imperialism (cited in Poe 55).

The above dimensions bring to the fore the projected goals of the Pan-Africanism movement. This reflects Toure's call for Pan-African Nationalism. As a struggle, Pan-Africanism should not be limited to any geographically dispersed or dislocated African peoples or their descendants. He advocacy was for an analysis of the total Pan-African Nationalist struggle against European slave intruders and foreign conquerors in Africa be done. Specific areas or

geographic regions where resistance occurred should *then* be observed (Poe 58).

Kwame Nkrumah suggests that the Pan-African Movement was only a continuation of African unity that predates the 20th century. He argues that,

Pan-Africanism was rooted in the 'age-old' quest for unity shared among Africans though his description of this condition is only in his speeches. Nkrumah spoke of earlier periods in African history that implied some sense of union in vast parts of the African continent. Two of these symbols of African unity were Ethiopia and the ancient mega-nations of West Africa (34).

The Pan-African discourse has several personalities who pulled their intellectual, economic, political resources to mobilize Africans in the homelands and people of African descent in Europe and America. One of these anti-colonial activists is George Padmore whose role in the development of the Pan-African Movement will be examined in the next unit of this study.

George Padmore

George Padmore was born in Trinidad in 1902 as Malcolm Ivan Meredith Nurse to a school teacher father, James Alonso Nurse, a son to a Barbados slave, Alphonso

Nurse. Padmore was married to Julia Semper and had an only child, a daughter he insisted must be called Blyden. Before he left the Caribbean for Fisk University in America, he insisted that his child (male or female) should be named Blyden after Edward Wilmot Blyden (www.questia.com). Leslie James describes Padmore as a “notorious anti-colonial organizer” (1) whose activities in the Independent Labour Party placed him under the surveillance of the London’s Metropolitan Police Special Branch for almost a decade. He had to change his name from Malcolm Ivan Meredith Nurse to George Padmore to avoid having problems with the authorities when he joined the Communist Party in the United States of America.

Padmore’s scholarly works have challenged conventional narratives of imperialism and especially African history. He cultivated journalism as a mass medium that could serve his political ends, covering all the major topics in international politics for audiences in the United States, Britain, and the colonies. Padmore’s own network was massive. From his base in London, he had attracted political contacts in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, Denmark, in Asia- Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Singapore. These were fostered through an unending stream of protest rallies, public lectures, and meetings with colonial peoples who travelled to London (Bogues 185 in James 3).

Pan-Africanism was always, to Padmore, a diaspora project that he worked to establish more concretely in Africa.

To him, Pan-Africanism was both ideological and a project to be accomplished. George Padmore’s political and ideological modulation across the 1940s and 1950s thus provides insight into a period of profound challenge for black radical thinkers. In 1946 the South African novelist Peter Abrahams introduced Padmore to the black American author Richard Wright, who had recently left the United States for Paris. The resultant friendship consolidated their convictions and anti-colonial activities through the exchange of correspondences on political thoughts and frustrations, literature, contacts to more contemporaries. Like some of his West Indian contemporaries such as Albert Gomes, Sylvia Chen, and Ralph Mentor (whom he shared journalistic space with in Trinidadian newspapers during the 1940s), Padmore shared a belief in what Harvey Neptune has referred to as the ‘usability of history’, which emphasized ‘the intimate relationship between the ordering of the past and social order in the present’ (James 8-9).

Padmore was a prominent expatriate who joined Kwame Nkrumah’s government in 1958, when he was appointed, Head of the Bureau of African Affairs. This position was created in an attempt by Nkrumah not to offend Ghanaian government officials and at the same time avoid scuttling the ideals of the Pan-African Movement. Katherina Schramm gauges the moment thus,

Nkrumah had wanted to grant him [Padmore] a proper cabinet post. However, this idea was met with resistance from within the government, so that Nkrumah was forced to create the Bureau of African Affairs as an external institution. Despite those obstacles, the Bureau played a vital role in the coordination of the Pan-African conferences as well as in the collaboration with African liberation movements (66).

The opposition to the appointment of Padmore was more or less a demonstration of the ill-disposition of continental Africans to the diaspora. The nationalists in the homelands felt some sense of inferiority or insecurity having the emigration of the diasporas given the latter sophisticated education and sundry exposure. This has been a challenge to the contribution of the Pan-Africanists to the development of their ancestral homeland.

The Pan-Africanists vehemently debunked the intellectual swindle popularized by the racist Europeans. For instance, Cheikh Anta Diop decries the Eurocentric position on African civilization thus, "as soon as a race has created a civilization, there can be no more possibility of its being Black" (133). Nationalism, the West claims to be one of its gift to the world. The Eurocentric disposition of the West was evident when they claimed that the political awakening

during the Cold War was a reflection of Communist inducement. Padmore comments,

Since the end of the Second World War it has become notorious, both in the press and in certain political circles of the Western world, to ascribe every manifestation of political awakening in Africa to Communist inspiration. This is gross hypocrisy, part of the Cold War propaganda designed to discredit African nationalists and to alienate from their movements the sympathy and support of anti-colonial elements within Labour and progressive organizations, which, while friendly towards the political aspiration of the colonial peoples, are hostile to Communism (Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?...15*).

The Eurocentric mandate Padmore maintains is either deliberately misleading or self-deceiving (17) because,

The dynamic forces of post-war anti-colonialist movements which are challenging the political and economic domination of the West are the spontaneous expression of the hopes and

desires of the Africans, looking forward to a place as free men in a free world. Africans do not have to wait for Communists to 'incite' them. The realities of their status have infused their determination to be free. And they prefer to attain freedom under the standard of pan-Africanism, a banner of their own choosing (17).

The Pan-African sentiment was aggregated in a movement at the beginning of the 20th century several decades before the ideological war (Cold War). Thus, it is appallingly self-deceiving to telescope Africans in diaspora and those in the continent evolved a synergy to guarantee the freedom and integration of the African into the mainstream of the New World and the independence of the colonized in Africa. This is so because the dignity of the African is only guaranteed when he is respected everywhere. Padmore's advocacy was in this direction.

The year 1960 was epochal in the historical annals of the continent of Africa. This year heralded the increasing number of independent states, hence, the celebrative phrase, "Year of Africa" (Schramm 66).

Padmore's political sophistication and the demands of the Pan-African Federation to organize the upcoming Pan-African Congress provided a strong impetus for him to greet

and impress another comrade with a reputation as a determined hard-worker. Especially one already imbued with the ideas proper for the cause (Poe 86). Padmore was one of the key organizers of the 1945 Manchester PAC and had previously been a dominant organizer with the International African Friends of Abyssinia. This organization was formed in 1937 as a direct response to the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia (Abyssinia). Because Abyssinia had avoided colonization, it shared the distinct honor with, to a lesser extent, Liberia, as an emblem of African sovereignty. The sacrosanct nature of Abyssinia is directly connected to Italy's violation of her freedom. Looking back askance to Italy's earlier encounter with Abyssinia clarifies the episodic nature of their relationship (Poe 67). With his colleague, Amy Garvey (Garvey's second wife), Padmore worked tirelessly to organize the Pan-African Congress after World War II with the solicited assistance from DuBois and Paul Robinson (Esedebe 45).

Padmore was actively involved in the decolonization process in Africa unlike the "café intellectuals" (James 11) who talked more with little or no action. Padmore was a product of a generation of black women and men who began to clearly see and forcefully articulate their condition within dominant structures of power that, they contended, shaped all of society. Rather than advocating the establishment of competent colonial administrations, these crop activists confronted the idea of

imperialism to its foundation. They achieved this feat through proselytizing the awareness of the deception of the white world and their exploitation of the Blacks on the pages of newspapers. This is because, true to one of Padmore's clichés, "when once a Negro's eyes are opened they refuse to shut again" (quoted in James 15). Therefore, through diligent enlightenment the Blacks will reassert their dignity and independence.

The appalling labour and economic situation at the time in both the New World and Africa demanded action. Being a communist and writer with *Negro Worker*, Padmore rose to this demand by trying to directly connect trade union organizations in the West Indies, Latin America, and Africa. At the end of 1931, he was transferred from Moscow to the crucial port city of Hamburg. By the end of 1932, he could boast a vast network of individuals and organizations across Africa, the United States, the West Indies, Britain, and, to a lesser extent, Latin America (26). The end of World War II thus marked the inclusion of colonial and coloured labour as new features of both the international labour movement and Pan-Africanism.

The paucity of funds hampered the activities of Pan-African Federation (PAF). To raise the needed funds, Padmore solicited funds on two occasions in 1948. He had to venture into writing, publishing and selling the report of the 1945 Pan-African Congress. A total of 2,000 copies were printed at the cost of £100 and about half of the cost of

printing was generated from sales to pay the publisher. This does not mean that copies did not sell but the proceeds from the bountiful sales in the colonies never reached London (James 100). Apart from the financial challenge, Padmore had two other issues- physical and mental exhaustion and alienation from kin in the continent. Recall the opposition Padmore faced in Ghana during Nkrumah's reign. These challenges constituted the other side of the coin in Padmore's Pan-African activities in the 20th century.

Conclusion

The presence of Africans in the New World was majorly due to the slave trade. The desire for freedom and integration of the freed slaves into the New World posed a serious challenge just as the issue of independence in Africa. The contributions of George Padmore to the promotion of the Pan-African Movement have earned him a place in history and described probably as one who has "much more rightful claim to the title of the Father of Pan-Africanism than W. E. B. du Bois, on whom the title was bestowed. His life was devoted to the true emancipation and unification of Africans and those of African descent" (Adi and Sherwood 152).

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