The politics of Pan-Africanism

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The Politics of Pan-Africanism is an unfinished politics. The formal political arrangements that emerged from the political strivings of African descendants in the 20th century such as the Pan-African Congresses, the establishment of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 and the African Union in 2002 are stepping stones on a road still to be completed. In this chapter I will utilise themes emanating from Pan-African thought and practice to argue for a renewed Pan-African politics. One that is people centred and focused on empowering African descendants wherever they reside and roam. A Pan-Africanism that refocuses the link between African descendants at home and those abroad.

It was in 1900 under the direction of the Trinidadian lawyer Henry Sylvester Williams that a small group of African descendants met in London to usher in the formal beginnings of Pan-African politics. Their focus was to construct a political project that would seek to bring dignity, self-determination, and liberation for millions of their brothers and sisters around the world. This meeting is remembered as the first Pan-African Congress. Subsequent Pan-African Congresses were held throughout the 20th century, including most notably the 5th Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945 which laid the ground for African independence.

These meetings were and are part of an ongoing 500 year struggle of African descendants to break the shackles of Europe, its diaspora, and its continued oppression of African people. Even with the formal end of oppressive white supremacist systems of control such as apartheid, colonialism, and trans-atlantic enslavement, African descendants are not truly free. African governmental and institutional arrangements are still beholden to the West and more recently to China. To break the cycle of exploitation and dependence requires a renewed Pan-African politics that links the struggles of African descendant communities in their locales to international African descendant networks, and supranational governance arrangements. These movements and the systems that support them need to focus on people and the empowerment of their communities. A renewed Pan-African politics should be one that focuses on rights, justice, reparations, and recognition for all African descendants. The themes that the chapter will focus on to articulate these politics are those of race, recognition and identity; return, liberation, and unification.
The unfinished politics of race, recognition and identity

In 2018 the Washington Post reported that the 42nd President of the United States referred to countries populated by African descendants on the continent and in the diaspora as “...thole countries.” He wanted the United States to have fewer migrants from these countries as he believed that they were a drain on the nation. It is a cruel irony that the Western hemisphere was built on the backs of labour from so called “...thole countries.” Its wealth was sustained by its colonial exploitation of African land, labour, and resources, and its global economic and political hegemony has been maintained by its continual exploitation of African mineral resources and African descendant labour. Black and brown bodies supposedly come from “...tholes,” but Europe and the US could not have become “great” without them. The President of the United States marginalisation of non-white people is not the cry of the isolated white supremacist, what he thinks is embedded into the economic, political, and cultural fabric of Western societies. Enslavement and colonisation was accompanied by a white supremacist ideology of race that deeply influenced, and continues to influence, Western education, religion, politics, economics, and culture.

Racism is an endemic feature of Western societies. To be truly free, therefore, African descendants need to be engaged in a global struggle for recognition. African descendants when faced with ritual humiliations and assaults on their identities have fought back and established political, cultural, and intellectual movements that have sought to propagate that Africans are people of culture, high intellectual capability, and that our lives and cultures matter. From Black Consciousness in South Africa, to Black Power in the US, from Negritude to the Harlem Renaissance, from Ethiopia Unbound to Afrocentrism, African descendants have been refuting the white supremacist designation of themselves and have drawn inspiration from each other’s art, literature, poetry, music and political, spiritual, and cultural rhetoric to develop a deep well spring of thought and experience.

An important example of this in the 20th century was the inspiration provided by the Universal Negro Improvement Association’s (UNIA) publication the Negro World. The publication was a mixture of political and cultural articles that articulated a proud Black identity. African descendant women wrote features in the publication, and poets and writers were able to express their creativity and African identity within its pages. Published in the era of colonialism, the British banned its distribution within its colonial territories, but it was smuggled to various places and proved to be inspirational to African descendants across the world including those on the continent in their fight for independence. Marcus Garvey, Amy Ashwood, and Amy Jacques Garvey, all African Caribbean descendants, were key figures in the development of the UNIA and its publications.

They join a chorus of African descendant Caribbean voices instrumental in the spreading of Pan-African positive Black identities to different parts of the world. As they moved to Europe, Africa, and the US, Caribbean thinkers and activists (Franz Fanon, George Padmore, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Una Marsden, Claudia Jones, CLR James etc.) wrote, spoke, established political and cultural organisations, publishing houses, shops, restaurants, places of worship which in their various guises fostered a sense of positive African identity in places and spaces that were virulently hostile to the presence of a positive and conscious African identity. Importantly they brought Africa to geographical spaces outside of the continent.
A notable feature of Pan-Africanism, as outlined, has been the complex movement of ideas, songs, poems, fashions, faiths, thoughts, and people that have moved across space and time to inspire individuals and communities to be much more than their surroundings and economic and political circumstances would suggest that they could be.\(^{14}\)

Although powerful political protagonists and movements have emerged from within the Pan-African sphere of influence it is still a fundamental truth that African descendants are still amongst the most marginalised and most disadvantaged populations wherever they are on the planet and they are still deemed by many to be a lesser part of humanity. A positive racialised identity has mitigated and countered some of the devastating impact of white supremacy and its consequences, but certainly has not ended it, so where does this leave us? And where do we go from here?

In order for The politics of race, recognition, and identity to actually make a more material difference in the lives of marginalised African descendants, there needs to be a comprehensive alliance of African descendant social movement forces, with African descendant institutional forces, be they governmental or civil societal.\(^ {15}\) All African descendants need to come together regardless of geographic location to work towards common recognition and respect for African lives and cultures.

2015 marked the start of the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent.\(^ {16}\) The decade provides an opportunity for nations to counter racial discrimination and to acknowledge and support the contribution of African descendant communities to the global family of nations. In some respects it is an important landmark in the politics of Pan-Africanism, as it is international recognition of the collective experiences of people of African descent and the historical and contemporary discrimination that they have experienced. At the time of writing however, we are nearly halfway through the decade and aside from some memorial events to remember enslavement and some building of monuments, not much has happened. In fact as stated at the beginning of the section in the same decade some Western leaders have doubled down on their racism and cultural supremacist rhetoric and practice.

At grassroots level, African descendant communities have been organising to pursue an agenda of justice and recognition for African people.\(^ {17}\) Grassroots social movements such as Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter, have emerged or intersected with the decade and have been led by young people.\(^ {18}\) They have gained some traction in their local contexts and, as movements have done in the past their local struggles have inspired others to challenge police brutality, institutionalised racism, and colonial legacies across geographic boundaries. More however could be achieved on these issues if nation states with majority African descendant populations consciously supported these efforts, with financial resources, media platforms and political endorsement. And not just nation states, African descendant faith based institutions of all religious persuasions are places of influence and resource. They should be advocating on behalf of their communities that Black lives matter, that African bodies are sacred and that it is a moral imperative to support communities that suffer discrimination and marginalisation as a result of their African ancestry.\(^ {19}\)

African descendant states and civil societies need to work together on the global stage for the benefit of African descendant communities. Both are victims of white supremacy, but for too long it has been too easy for former colonial powers to continue to divide and cause distress to African descendant communities. African peoples need to recognise the political importance of collective action in order for African identities to be protected and positively enhanced. Thomas Sankara the inspirational but short lived leader of Burkina Faso, outlined this perspective in 1984 on a visit to Harlem:

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We believe that the struggle we are waging in Africa and in Burkina Faso is the same struggle you are waging here in Harlem. And we believe that we in Africa must give our brothers in Harlem all the support needed so that their struggle, too can become known. When people the world over become aware that Harlem is a living heart that beats to Africa’s rhythm, Harlem will be respected by everyone. Any African head of state who comes to New York must first pass through Harlem. That is why we consider that our White House is in Black Harlem.\textsuperscript{20}

Sankara recognised the importance of the people on the continent and those in the diaspora working together and supporting each other and that support was not a one-way street from the diaspora to the continent, support needed to flow both ways. The shrinking of Black Harlem,\textsuperscript{21} a historical jewel in the storied history of Pan-Africanism, as a result of gentrification and displacement of Black families is yet another reminder that white interests will forcibly take whatever Black communities create and build unless they are resisted. A renewed politics of Pan-Africanism needs to bring all Africans together in the struggle for recognition and affirmation of African identities, both state and civil society. In order for this to happen, much closer institutional and social relationships need to be developed between the continent and its diasporas and it is to this politics that I now turn when reflecting on the politics of return.

\textbf{The unfinished politics of return}

2019 marks 400 years since the first enslaved African arrived on United States soil. In remembering the occasion the President of Ghana in Washington in September 2018 reiterated a commitment that previous governments had made inviting the descendants of enslaved Africans to return home to the continent.\textsuperscript{22} In extending the invitation President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo, partly drew on the idea that Africa’s lost sons and daughters could return home and reclaim their identity. It was also evident however that return was also a commercial opportunity for Ghana, the legacy of African enslavement could be used to encourage tourism and economic investment. As with the previous theme the idea of return is not a static, it has multiple meanings and resonances depending on place, history and circumstances. As we reflect on these multiple reasons the argument being made is that a renewed politics of Pan-Africanism should view return as a return to ideals. A return to African dignity, respect, communal identification and empowerment wherever African descendants find themselves.

For early enslaved Africans with distinct memories of particular places, return was a desire to return to the familiar, the specific place, where their families and land were. For enslaved African descendants born in the Americas, return meant to a more generalised place, to a land of freedom, to a place of opportunity whereby one escapes the terror of white supremacy.\textsuperscript{23} For example, the Tabon people, enslaved Africans in Brazil, who upon emancipation in the late 19th century returned to different places in Nigeria and Ghana to make new lives for themselves.\textsuperscript{24} Religious and political zeal by some Africans saw them want to leave the Western hemisphere and return with a vision to make Africa a great continent a beacon of hope proving that African descendants were the equal of the rest of humanity. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner was an ardent religious returnee inspiring African American missionary endeavours in Africa.\textsuperscript{25} Martin Delaney was another key exponent of return to Africa in the 19th century.\textsuperscript{26} In the 20th century the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the largest African diaspora social movement to exist, had return to Africa as part of its platform of global African descendant empowerment.\textsuperscript{27} Other motivations for return include
the idea of working to assist the continent in its development and the idea of a spiritual return to Africa, which include a physical return to the holy land or a spiritual identification, with the continent viewed as a metaphorical home.\textsuperscript{28}

In the post-independence era new diasporic Africans have returned home for business, education, politics, retirement, and other personal or collective reasons. As alluded to at the start of the section some African descendants are returning as tourists. They want to connect with their heritage and then go back “home.” People have always and will always return to the “motherland” however the current configuration of the continent is far from a Pan-African ideal. In the midst of the multiplicity of reasons for African descendants to return, what stands out is that all people are seeking a better space; Africa as the place of hope and opportunity.

The Politics of a Pan-African return is at odds with a continent that is currently comprised of 54 nation states all with their own border controls. The vision of the descendants of enslaved Africans was of a return to a home that would exhibit the best traits of humanity, a beacon of hope for all those that had suffered under the yoke of white supremacy. Africa as currently configured with its colonial borders still intact does not constitute a place of return for many African descendants. For some their diasporic space constitutes home and one can argue that places like Brazil, Haiti, and Jamaica are as African as places currently on the continent. Hence there is an argument to make for the politics of return to be renewed in the 21st century as to a return to Pan-African ideals. Wherever African descendants reside, the ideals of recognition, justice, equality, and community empowerment should be fought for and guaranteed. These should not just be abstract ideals but should find tangible expression, whereby African descendants garner rights and have responsibilities from belonging to an African descendant collective.

This requires African descendants to have a political stake in African spaces on the continent and the diaspora. African descendants should have a passport that recognises Pan-African citizenship and automatic right of entry without visa to any state with African majority population. Pan African responsibilities could include making financial and in kind contributions to Pan-African wide continental and diaspora programmes. The funds and the decision making concerning their allocation could be administered and decided at the African Union, but an expanded union with representation from the global African descendant community. A Pan-African fund should focus on things like education, welfare, and healthcare for African descendants with an emphasis on finding African solutions to African problems. African descendants should have voting rights and be able to contribute ideas as to how these resources should be utilised. The greatest resource of Africa is its people who are scattered all over the globe. If the people could be brought together to engage in a collective endeavour and they were given the recognition, means, and status to identify as a tangible collective new life would be breathed into a politics of return. It would bring a new sense of energy to the cause of Pan-African liberation and it is this crucial theme that we now turn our attention to.

\textbf{The unfinished politics of liberation}

Over the past 300 years one of the key achievements of African descendants has been their victories over oppressive systems including trans-atlantic enslavement, colonialism, and apartheid. When enslaved Africans in San Domingo shook the world by overthrowing their French enslavers at the end of the 18th century and established Haiti, the first black independent republic in the Western hemisphere, it set in motion reverberations of resistance that stretched across time and space.\textsuperscript{29} The 19th century saw African descendants liberate
themselves from the bondage of enslavement, the 20th century witnessed African descend-
ants gaining freedom and independence from European colonialism and end one of the
greatest indignities that Africans have suffered in this era of white supremacy—that of apart-
heid. For all the victories, there is still the strong sense that African descendants are only partially liberated. African descendants are still shackled by educational and economic under-
development, poverty, mass incarceration, and poor health. On the continent formal political independence has not resulted in freedom from European imperial exploitation. African countries are still tied to the boundaries outlined by the colonialists. African countries are still heavily dependent on the West and more recently the Chinese. They are not free to chart their own course in the world.

One of the reasons why African descendants are not experiencing the proper rewards of liberation is that our oppressors have not paid the price for the havoc, mayhem, and distress that they wreaked upon the lives of so many. Enslavement and colonialism combined was 500 years of mass destruction wrought upon African descendants by Europe and its diasporas. The oppressors have expressed a few words of regret here and there but they have not made restitution for the horrendous damage that they have caused. Because they have suffered no negative consequences and not been held accountable for their iniquitous actions, they continue to treat African descendants as second class citizens, as people who require help. African descendants do not need help, African descendants require justice. It is baffling that individuals and communities responsible for murder, systematic oppression, and exploitation under apartheid, pay no restitution. They just confess to a commission and then get to live out the rest of their lives as if nothing happened. This is a travesty. As long as the oppressors continue to benefit whilst the vast majority of victims still languish in poverty in South Africa then liberation is unfinished.

European states benefited hugely from their colonial exploitation of the African continent and some of those nations like France continue to directly exploit their former colonies manipulating their currencies and interfering in their internal politics whilst feigning benevolence. Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and other nations made massive profits from the dehumanisation of African bodies and exploitation of African land. They looted Africa of its resources both human and physical. It is incredulous that these democratic nations so called upholders of rule of law and human rights continue to deny that they owe African peoples justice and reparations for their heinous crimes against African humanity. Until this is addressed liberation is unfinished business.

The same is true of the United States; the most powerful nation on earth was built on the backs of the labour of enslaved Africans. The nation utilised the power of the state to privilege its white population and to subjugate its African descendant population firstly to that of sub-human and then after resistance and struggle to that of second class citizen. These are human rights violations of the highest order, which the US still refuses to pay restitution and make right. It is disgraceful that this iniquitous treatment of African descendants is still being debated and contested.

When individuals, organisations or states are engaged in activities that undermine African dignity and self-worth, they need to be sanctioned. There has to be a global realisation that discrimination and marginalisation of African descendants carries with it a heavy price of economic boycott, moral opprobrium, cultural and sporting exclusion, religious condemnation and social ostracism. The quest for African liberation requires that perpetrators of racism and injustice must pay a high price for their horrendous actions, that is the only way that the representation and treatment of our people in these societies is going to change. I think the African American Poet June Jordan captures the sentiment I am trying to convey in her work entitled “Poem about Police Violence”
Tell me something what do you think would happen if everytime they kill a black boy then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a black man then we kill a cop
You think the accident rate would lower subsequently.\textsuperscript{34}

If white people suffered even a modicum of genuine hurt in payback for the horrendous indignities of racism, colonialism, segregation, then I am certain they would be much less inclined to malign and exploit African descendants.

It is a stinging indictment of the Western world that not one nation from all those who have committed atrocities and gained wealth and power from their exploitative practices have paid meaningful restitution to African descendants. It lets us know that when it comes to the lives of African descendants that the West is deeply invested in and protective of its white privilege. African communities across the globe need to recognise that we need a politics of reparations and restitution if our liberation is to bring genuine freedom. White privilege and eurocentric power needs to be confronted, needs to pay for its wrongs and needs to face consequences for its evil. This is a formidable struggle. It needs collective endeavour; a renewed politics of unity if we are to achieve full liberation, and in the last section I will outline what that unity should look like.

The unfinished politics of unification

With the formal establishment of the African Union in 2002, the continent has a political infrastructure in place that is inching its way towards a form of unification. In 2013 on the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Organisation of African Unity, continental leaders set out Agenda 2063 an ambitious rhetorical plan to have

\textit{An integrated prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena.}\textsuperscript{35}

Part of the agenda 2063 plans include an economic single market across Africa, a high speed rail network, free movement of people, an African e-learning higher education infrastructure, and a continental African cultural museum. The plan in and of itself is aspirational and African leaders have been meeting since its announcement attempting to make aspiration a reality. There are however other realities at play that causes a re-assessment of this political project. The African Union building was built by the Chinese and across the continent it is Chinese money, Chinese technology, Chinese labour that is driving much of Africa’s development agenda. The model of development that the African Union is pursuing appears to be a capitalist model, driven by ideas of open markets and wealth generation that it is hoped will cascade down to everyone’s benefit. This model of development cannot be achieved without horrendous cost to ordinary African lives and is not a price worth paying.

A renewed Pan-African politics needs to be a people centred rather than land centred politics. It needs to be global rather than just continental in focus. African brothers and sisters dying of Ebola should be a Pan-African concern. African brothers and sisters drowning in the Mediterranean should be a Pan-African imperative. African brothers and sisters being murdered by the police should be on the Pan-African agenda. African brothers and sisters being treated unjustly should be entitled to support, assistance, and ultimately justice from a Pan-African derived political community. The current political arrangements, although they give a nod to Pan-African ideals and principles, lack any serious attempt at engaging the vast majority of African descendants in their enterprises. Pan Africanism that continues to be
elite driven and ignores the wants and needs of its communities is destined to continue be an incomplete political project.

African descendants have been blessed with women and men of great vision and tenacity who believed that it was possible for a despised and neglected people to come together and establish a political order that would transform their people’s lives and the world. The political kingdom needs territory and resources to function but a renewed political project needs be a mass based participatory project that focuses on empowering African descendant people across the globe. That should be the renewed emphasis of a politics of Pan-Africanism.

Conclusion

The power of Pan-Africanism lies in the fact that disparate communities of African descendants recognise that they can transcend ethnic divisions, geographical boundaries, class, gender, and other social divisions to imagine an African descendant collective free from the legacy of white supremacy. Much of the political focus in recent times has focused on African continental development as the mechanism to make that dream a reality. The call here is for renewed vision of Pan-Africanism that places the quest for justice, liberation, recognition, and protection of our identities as political projects wherever African descendants roam, an Africa for African descendants at home and abroad.

Notes

4 Europe and its diaspora refers to European conquest and migration starting with Columbus 1492 voyage and consequent diasporas including white migration and conquest in North America and Australasia.
7 Walter Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (London: Bogle L’Ouverture, 1972)
10 Space does not allow for a deep exploration of the richness and depth of African descendant cultural and political thought. See Hakim Adi Pan-Africanism: A History for very useful summary within the context of Pan-Africanism
12 Laurence Levine “Marcus Garvey and the Politics of Revitalisation” in John Hope Franklin and August Meier (eds) Black Leaders of the 20th Century (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982) p. 120.
13 African Caribbean influence on Pan-Africanism is immense, consider for example significance of Rastafarianism or Negritude. Individuals mentioned in main work have been written about for


17 Many of the movements described have an active social media presence and books have been written by protagonists involved in such movements. For a radical critique of Pan-Africanism and a call to engage in grass roots Black community activism see Kehinde Andrews *Back to Black Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century* (London: Zed, 2018)


27 There are many aspects of UNIA that have been the focus of study, for the important role of women in UNIA and in back to Africa movements more broadly see Keisha N. Blain *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018)

28 Rastafarianism a notable expression of the spiritual ideal.


31 French malevolence in Africa was even recently attested to by fellow Europeans the Italians much to French annoyance. Angela Giuffrida “France summons Italian envoy over hostile Africa remarks” *The Guardian* 22 January 2019 www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/22/france-summons-italian-envoy-over-hostile-africa-remarks accessed 13 August 2019


35 African Union “Agenda 2063 The Africa We Want” https://au.int/agenda2063/overview accessed 13 August 2019

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