

What is Pan-Africanism?

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Let's talk about Pan-Africanism, its history, its present, its criticisms, and its future.

What is Pan-Africanism?

Many books have been written on the subject of Pan-Africanism, devoting a lot of time to carve out some sort of definition. Some writers don't even bother to define it, conceding that it has meant different things to different people at different times. I'll be presenting just some of their many differing views on what Pan-Africanism is and what it should look like, so draw your own conclusions. That being said, let's try a thing with the definition anyway.

Pan-Africanism is grounded in the belief that all African-descended peoples are one nation. Not in the sense of nation state, but in the sense of all African-descended peoples, both on continent and diaspora, sharing an interconnected history, purpose, and destiny. That destiny being a united and independent Africa as the basis for liberation. As an ideology and movement, Pan-Africanism encourages solidarity and unity for economic, social, cultural, and political progress and emancipation, and ultimately, the uplifting of all peoples of African-descent.

Pan-Africanists have worked to resist the exploitation and oppression of all those of African heritage, oppose and refute the ideologies of anti-African racism, and celebrate African achievement, history and the very notion of being African. Most Pan-Africanists throughout history have also been various flavours of socialist, seeing capitalism as the enemy of liberation and seeing communal relations, as were present in pre-colonial African societies, as a necessity.

Pan-Africanism is heavily tied to Black nationalism, which arose around the social, political, and economic empowerment of Black communities. The nation here is not defined by borders, but rather by people who are bound together by common experience, especially to resist Western domination and maintain Black cultures and identities. It is wholly separate from white nationalism, which took the name decades later and is inextricably tied to white supremacy.

So who are some of these thinkers, leaders, politicians who have added to the body of Pan-Africanism? Let's see...there's Toussaint Louverture, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara, Marcus Garvey, C.L.R. James, Kwame Ture, Malcolm X, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire...I could go on. As you can see, it's a bit of a mixed bag. It would be hard to describe all of these people as united in objective, as their ideas were often quite divergent. Yet, in some sense, they all flew the metaphorical flag of Pan-Africanism.

Oh yeah, Pan-Africanism has a pretty fly flag. The red represents the blood that unites all people of African ancestry, and that must be shed for liberation, the Black

represents Black people as a nation united under a common heritage, and the green represents the lush abundance of Africa's wealth.

To understand Pan-Africanism, you need some context on the history of African peoples, which I can only provide in very broad strokes for now.

A Brief History of African Peoples

As the most genetically diverse continent in the world and the cradle of humanity, it is from Africa that various peoples dispersed and carved spaces for themselves across the world. Africa has a legacy spanning thousands of years of nations, kingdoms, and cultures rising, falling, innovating, expanding, and sharing with the wider world. Africans throughout history contributed to the development of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, architecture, philosophy, and more. Even post-colonialism, there are over 3,000 ethnic groups in Africa. I don't use the term tribe, by the way, because historically speaking, it's been wielded to dismiss complex societies that Europeans have seen as primitive.

Prior to colonization, there was no shared Pan-African identity on the continent. How could there be? They didn't all share the same religion, language, or culture. The Khoisan peoples in South Africa had little in common with the Songhai of West Africa or the Habesha of East Africa. Africa is massive, and even people living right next to each other had vastly different lifestyles, practices, and barriers that separated them.

It's no surprise then, that when the Atlantic Slave Trade kicked into gear, starting with the Portuguese, things truly devolved into madness. Africans were kidnapped and sold into slavery, often by fellow Africans. Kingdoms and nations which facilitated slavery were quick to become enslaved themselves. The brutal appetite for more exploitable, disposable labour in the Americas increased. At least 12 million Africans were transported to the Americas, millions more died in the perpetration of this great crime, and new nations came to be established in the Caribbean, Brazil, the United States and elsewhere. It was the largest forced migration event in human history. There was also the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade, which is often left out of the conversation surrounding the enslavement of Africans as its consequences do not compare in size nor scope, but I do still find it important to highlight.

It was through the Atlantic Slave Trade and the subsequent gruelling and inhumane treatment in the Americas that the various peoples of Africa were stripped of their original cultures and brought together for the very first time. The African diaspora began to unite and develop identities of their own. Meanwhile, Africa was colonized and carved up by competing and collaborating European powers, all hungry for the wealth of the continent. At the Berlin Conference, borders and divisions were drawn that continue to cripple the continent today.

It has been nearly 500 years since the first Trans-Atlantic slave voyage. As a people, we have not known peace nor justice since. The creation of our diaspora came alongside the emergence of global capitalism, European domination, and anti-Black

racism. Racist ideas were forged to support the economic motives of the elites, and even today, many still hold to a perception of African inferiority, (mis)informing their attitude toward our conditions. We still suffer from the erasure and suppression of our history and legacy. Our labour has built and continues to build the wealth of the Global North. We have been exploited not just by European powers, but also Arab and Asian powers, and our enslavement persists today across the world. Our land has been stolen and we have been stolen from our land. We have been denied autonomy, denied rights, and denied our very humanity.

The historic response of African peoples has been Pan-Africanism, a river with many streams and currents. Let's discuss some of the major thinkers and movements over the years.

The History of Pan-Africanism

Pre-19th Century

In the late 18th century, the slave trade was in full swing. And yet, even then, abolitionists worked to campaign for its end. One of the most famous of these abolitionist groups was The Sons of Africa, made up of educated, formerly-enslaved Africans in London. It was the first Black political group in Britain and has been described as one of the first Pan-African organizations. The Sons of Africa wrote letters to the press, lobbied Parliament, jointly addressed the Quakers and co-operated with other abolitionists and radicals as part of the wider campaign against the trafficking of Africans and for the rights of all. Notable members included Olaudah Equiano, a slave since childhood, sold twice before purchasing his freedom, and Ottobah Cugoano, who was sold into slavery when he was 13 years old and eventually purchased, educated, and freed by a British merchant.

19th Century

Arguably the most existentially terrifying moment for the European empires in the early 19th century was the success of the slave revolt in Haiti. The Haitian revolution, famously led by, among others, Toussaint Louverture, began in 1791 and ended in 1804, establishing the first and only state to be founded by slave uprising. It challenged long-held European beliefs about the intelligence and capacity of enslaved peoples to achieve and maintain their own freedom. While post-revolution Haiti faced assassinations, embargoes, crippling taxation by the French, and a highly segmented colour-based class society, what Haitians established was a beacon of hope for Africans everywhere, even post-emancipation. Haiti became a safe haven for runaway slaves, revolutionaries, and all who were oppressed.

In the mid to late 19th century, early thinkers like Alexander Crummel, Martin Delany, and Edward Blyden began to lay the groundwork for more comprehensive Pan-African thought. Alexander Crummel, born free in 1819, was one of the first Black nationalists, advocating for solidarity and economic development. Martin Delany, born free in 1812, famously called for “Africa for Africans”. He believed that Black people had no future in the United States, and should leave to found a new nation elsewhere, like in the Caribbean or South America. He ruthlessly criticized so many

individuals, ideas, and institutions that he alienated moderate abolitionists. He also opposed racial segregation (Of course) and was well known for his deep-seated pride in his own people. Lastly, Edward Blyden, born free in 1832, advocated for a return to Africa to help rebuild the continent. He was one of the first to articulate a notion of “African Personality”.

A lot of their ideas and actions would be considered outdated or plain wrong today, like Crummel’s colonization efforts in Liberia and Blyden’s support of Zionism. Nonetheless the works and ideas of all three of these men would still go on to inspire countless future Pan-Africanists.

The 1900s–1920s

Pan-Africanism really began to take shape with the beginning of the first Pan-African conference in London in 1900. It was organized by Trinidadian barrister Henry Sylvester Williams, just before the Paris Exhibition of the same year. It was attended by 37 delegates and 10 other participants from across the diaspora. One notable attendee was W.E.B. DuBois, who played a leading role in drafting a letter to European leaders appealing to them to struggle against racism, to grant the right to self-government to the colonies in Africa and the West Indies, and demanding political and other rights for African Americans. It was the first time in history that Black people had gathered from all parts of the world to discuss and improve the condition of their race. After the conference, chapters of the Pan-African Association were set up in Jamaica, Trinidad, and the US. Eventually they would begin to meet under the banner of the Pan-African Congress. More on that later.

Onto a rather controversial figure, let’s talk about the so-called Negro in the Hat: Marcus Garvey. He founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Born in Jamaica in 1887, Garvey was a Black nationalist in the Pan-African scene who advocated for racial pride and the building of institutions for the African diaspora. However, it would be more accurate to describe him as a dictatorial Black separatist, as he envisioned a unified Africa as a one-party state, governed by himself, that would enact laws to ensure Black racial purity. He believed America was a white man’s country and he described himself as the first fascist and Black capitalist. Although he was staggeringly ignorant about the diversity present in Africa, considered it backwards, and never visited the continent himself, he was big in the Back-to-Africa movement and ran the Black Star Line shipping and passenger company to help transport Americans to Liberia. He glorified many Western ideas, and even gave prominent supporters British titles like “Lords” and “Knights”. He was convicted of mail fraud and blamed Jewish people for conspiring against him because, and buckle in for this one, he collaborated with the Ku Klux Klan. He was deeply anti-socialist, anti-miscegenation, and anti-racial integration. His organization did design the Pan-African flag, which is

cool, but naturally, he alienated a lot of fellow Pan-African thinkers, as his ideas were so utterly divergent from the rest of them.

One thinker in particular that he frequently butt heads with was William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, born in 1868, who described Garvey as a “demagogue” that he tried his best to ignore. In fact, they seemed to hate each other. Du Bois is more openly recognized as a father of Pan-Africanism, although he started with the unfortunate title “Pan-Negroism”. Throughout his life, he contributed to a vast array of ideas, including Black Existentialism, and consistently advocated for the study of African history. He founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was an ardent proponent of equal rights. He was among the first African-Americans to highlight the colonial condition in Africa, and was deeply opposed to Garvey’s notion of African-American rule over Africa. Du Bois also understood the deep connections between capitalism and racism, and believed that socialism may be a better path towards racial equality. He was forced out of the NAACP due to his praise for Karl Marx and communist sympathies. Later in his life, he fled the US and found refuge in Ghana, under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, and died the day before Dr Martin Luther King’s March on Washington in 1963, which he himself tried to organize 60 years before.

The 1920s–1940s

By now we cooking. In the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, a whole wave of thinkers and ideas came into the fold of the movement. The development and propagation of Pan-African ideas would spread even further, and it had tremendous influence on the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, which Du Bois had helped promote. The first four Pan-African Congresses took place during this time. In 1919 in Paris, 1921 in London, 1923 in London again, and 1927 in New York City.

At the first Congress, there were 57 delegates representing 15 countries, including Du Bois and Ida Gibbs, who represented Pan-Africa. The focus of this Congress in Paris was the petitioning of the Versailles Peace Conference, demanding that The Allies collaborate in the administration of former territories in Africa and that Africa be granted home rule. At the second Congress, Du Bois described the attendance of 26 different groups of people from all across Africa, Europe, The Caribbean, and The Americas, as well as fraternal organizations from Asia. The focus of this Congress, which took place in London, Brussels, and Paris, was the issuance of a declaration that criticized European colonial domination in Africa and lamented the unequal state of relations between white and Black races, calling for a fairer distribution of the world’s resources. At the third and fourth Congresses in London and New York City, the delegates again demanded self-rule and an end to European profiteering of the continent, and addressed problems in the Diaspora related to lynching and white minority rule.

There were also activists and writers like CLR James that gained prominence in this time. CLR James, born in Trinidad in 1901, made bold contributions to Black radical thought, blending Pan-African and Marxist ideas. He notably challenged the false dichotomy of “Pan-African Nationalism” or “Labour Internationalism” and therefore synthesized his opposition to racial, colonial, and class-based oppression. He deserves a video of his own. Other thinkers of this time include American Paul Robeson, Trinidadian George Padmore, Senegalese Léopold Senghor, Martiniquan Aimé Césaire, and Kenyan Jomo Kenyatta. You could call it a Pan-African, Black Atlantic intellectual community, as ideas traded freely across the diaspora.

The 1940s–1960s

In the late 1940s, amidst the Red Scare in the US, the rather socialist Pan-Africanist movement receded and Africans began to take the helm where African-Americans had before. In this era, I’d like to highlight the 5th Pan-African Congress and the rise of Kwame Nkrumah.

At the 5th Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945, in the presence of 200 members, the foundations of contemporary Pan-Africanism were laid. The goal was to draw up a general outline of a practical programme for the political liberation of Africa. They were far more militant than previous Congresses, desiring a free federation of African socialist states. As we will soon see, the results in the latter half of the century were a bit of a mixed bag. The Congress made demands for Independence, called for solidarity among all oppressed and exploited peoples, and condemned imperialism, racial discrimination, and capitalism. The 5th Congress would produce a diverse crop of African intellectual and political leaders who would go on to influence the continent in a variety of ways, including Obafemi Awolowo, and Kwame Nkrumah.

Nkrumah, born in 1909, was a pan-African Marxist-Leninist who led the Gold Coast independence movement that created the nation of Ghana in 1957 and co-founded the Organization of African Unity in 1963. He was deeply influenced by Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, George Padmore, CLR James, and Edward Blyden, looking to them for guidance on how Africa can build itself to become a force for good in the world. With independence, he became Ghana’s first Prime Minister.

Ghana under his leadership was basically a social democracy with a strong welfare state, education, healthcare, and some nationalized industries. He also worked to rapidly industrialize the country. Nkrumah promoted a Pan-African culture, decried Euro-centric norms, promoted traditional clothing, and opened museums and other cultural institutions. He also banned tribal identification in an effort to suppress the influence of local chiefs, with little success, and slowly grew his autocratic abilities, banning other political parties and becoming President for life. He was also criticized for building up a personality cult. Eventually he was overthrown in 1966 via Western-

backed coup and the National Liberation Council that took control privatized national industries under the supervision of multinational corporations. He never returned to Ghana again, and spent the rest of his days in Guinea, as honorary co-president of Ahmed Sékou Touré, a fellow “president for life”.

The 1960s–1980s

By now, Pan-Africanism was beginning to decline outside of Africa. In the US, The Black Panther Party became active between 1966 and 1982, militantly advocating for Black Power and organizing community social programs and cop-watches. The FBI considered the Black Panther Party “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” and worked to infiltrate the structure of the Party, assassinate and jail members and leaders, and drain resources. More than any previous Black political organization, the Black Panther Party emphasized class struggle, even over Pan-Africanism, leading to an eventual split with Kwame Ture and other more black nationalist members. The organization was far from perfect, with many internal divisions and tensions, due to the leadership’s hostility towards dissenting perspectives and alternative ideologies.

Meanwhile in Africa, the 6th Pan African Congress commenced in 1974 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Unlike previous Pan-African Congresses, it took place outside of the Western imperial core. It was at this stage that Pan-Africanists identified the threat of neocolonialism, considering the overthrow of various African governments and the use of Africans to assist in their downfall. Thus there was more emphasis amongst Pan-Africanists on class struggle against Western, Eastern, and African capitalists. However, they also, slowly, began to realize the failure of the various bureaucratic forms of socialism, and that the masses needed to be more involved to defeat elitism and autocracy. They also finally openly addressed the issue of women and decided to give support to political struggles for equality undertaken by black women.

This period also saw the rise of religiously zealous state capitalists like Robert Mugabe and Muammar al-Gaddafi, and the rise and fall of Thomas Sankara. Mugabe was the corrupt and ideologically vague Prime Minister and then President of Zimbabwe for three decades, starting in 1980. Gaddafi was an anti-Semitic Pan-Arabist and Pan-African who ruled Libya for 42 years starting in 1969 and advocated for the “United States of Africa”. Thomas Sankara was the so-called Che Guevara of Africa who launched largely positive, radical programmes for social, ecological, and economic change in Burkina Faso beginning in 1983. Of course, he also suppressed striking workers, banned unions, and restricted media freedom so...I have mixed feelings about him. Perhaps I’ll talk about it some other day. He was assassinated and his government was seized in 1987.

The 1980s, onward

The last decades of the 20th century dealt with the question of what Pan-Africanism should look like as the new millennium approached. Scholars began to develop the body of Afrocentrism, which emphasized African modes of thought, culture, and historical perspective as a corrective to the long tradition of European cultural and intellectual domination.

With the end of the Cold War, a new era of globalization began, yet Africa remained vulnerable to external intervention and neo colonialism. However, this period also saw some wins against settler colonialism, such as in South Africa with the end of Apartheid. The question of reparations for the impact of slavery and colonialism was reinvigorated at the First Pan-African Conference on Reparations in Abuja, Nigeria, in 1993. The Seventh Pan-African Congress was held in Kampala, Uganda, in 1994 and the Organization for African Unity was replaced by the African Union in 2002, which declared that it would encompass the entire African diaspora. The relevance of socialism in Pan-Africanism was now being questioned by post-Cold War era capitalist African leaders. Pan-Africanists and Black Africans also began to question who counts as an African in order to best create the conditions for African liberation and unity, as the enslavement of Black Africans by Arabs continues even to this day, especially in Libya and Mauritania.

So what's happening now?

Pan-Africanism Today

There's so much more I could've gone into concerning the past century of Pan-Africanism. What is clear is that while there may be agreement on the need for change, there are many differing views as to the nature of this change and how it might be brought about.

Pan-Africanism isn't discussed as often these days, even in radical diasporic circles, despite ongoing issues of corruption and oppression on the continent. Racism, Eurocentrism, the consequences of enslavement, colonialism and its legacies, a capital-centred world, and imperialism are all still relevant. Yet celebrities, opportunists, liberals, and memes have seized popular consciousness. A lot of people seem to have forgotten about international solidarity, but things might start changing soon.

Black Lives Matter Global Network might be considered by some to be a Pan-African movement, but is it? The Network states that its "intention from the very beginning was to connect Black people from all over the world who have a shared desire for justice to act together in their communities." But can it truly be considered Pan-African without a central concern with Africa? Is BLM Global something different altogether? What is the future of Pan-Africanism?

The Future of Pan-Africanism

I'm not a seance, but through this journey exploring Pan-Africanism, certain lessons have been made abundantly clear.

Firstly, Pan-Africanists need to delve much deeper into African history in order to avoid the errors of early thinkers, who homogenized African peoples and did not understand or reconcile divisions between nations, communities, and countries on the continent and in the diaspora. We are united in our struggle, but struggle isn't all there is. We are still a diverse and multifaceted people, with different needs and interests that need to be taken into account.

Secondly, petitions don't work. Electoral and liberal strategies for Pan-African liberation are time consuming ventures with very little payoff. The first Pan-African Congresses were focused on appealing to the governments of the world to respect African rights and freedoms, but it mostly fell on deaf ears. Even when such efforts did succeed, the rulers of the world still found ways to exploit us, through neo-colonial practices facilitated by the Black faces in high places they set up.

And speaking of Black faces in high places, it's clear that centralized, top-down organization based on elitism and cult of personality, as well as statist ventures as a whole, are a dead end. As the saying goes, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." At best, such leaders have become mere social democrats in a still stratified, neo colonized society, like Nelson Mandela. At worst, they've become corrupt, opportunistic autocrats, violently forcing their will onto the people, like Robert Mugabe. Or they've ended up imprisoned/assassinated like the Black Panther Party leaders, resulting in the demise of the whole organization. None of these attempts have led to the autonomy, free association, and self-realization of the masses. None of them have prefigured anything close to the freedom of African peoples that Pan-Africanism espouses. Pan-Africanism needs to move past leader-centric organization and focus on the full involvement and consensus of the people through horizontal organization based on local autonomy and global solidarity.

Pan-Africanists must also understand that there can be no Pan-Africanism that maintains sexism, colourism, texturism, homophobia, transphobia, queerphobia, ableism, or any other mode of oppression. Previous movements have failed to include and uplift some of the most vulnerable in our community. We can't change the past but we can learn for the future. The Anarkata philosophy and movement is particularly skilled at this, as it draws from a number of revolutionary frameworks, including Black Marxism, Pan Africanism, Black feminism, Social Ecology, Anarchism, and Queer liberation to build an inclusive, horizontal, anti-imperial, and eco-focused

movement without being invested in hierarchy, centralization, or a “Pan-African State” as the means to achieve global Black liberation.

There’s still a deep hunger for freedom. There’s still a need to unite. We’re still being subjugated and exploited by nations and capitalists of all flags. Africa & Africans, and oppressed peoples across the Global South, remain the pillars that hold up the capitalists of this Earth. Pan-Africanism is just one of many tools at our disposal as we make our way forward with knowledge of our history and ambition for our future. Our ecologically grounded, horizontally organized, decentrally planned, locally focused, globally minded, and socially centered future.

Peace.

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