

## **UMOJA CENTER AS A CONTINUATION OF THE PAN-AFRICANIST TRADITION IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT . 1**

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Perhaps it is crucial on this solemn occasion of the founding of the Umoja Center, which we have rightfully designated as the African Information and Cultural Center, to reflect on the significance of the Pan-Africanist tradition in the present historical context of black people in Africa and in the African diaspora. But before entering into this complicated and complex issue, it is imperative, since we are founding this African Center here in West Berlin, to indicate and pay a few homages. It is essential for us to historically recall and politically affirm that it was here in Berlin that one of the outstanding African intellectuals participated in the German Enlightenment, whose ideologue and spiritual leader Immanuel Kant was. It was here in Berlin in the early part of the eighteenth-century that the brilliant Ghanian philosopher, Anton Wilhelm Amo, taught and lived. If I'm not mistaken, he actually held a Chair in philosophy here at the University of Berlin. Later, this University was to be known as Humboldt University, called after the outstanding nineteenth-century German student of nature, education and languages, the great Humboldt. It was also here in Berlin that another great black figure participated in German intellectual culture DuBois, the great black American sociologist and thinker, the real founder of Pan-Africanist philosophy and the Pan-Africanist political movement, studied at Humboldt University in the late nineteenth-century. He studied under brilliant German teachers, like the famous sociologist Georg Simmel and the towering historian Meinecke. In mentioning these two great sons of Africa, Amo and DuBois, we seek to make it clear to everyone that in establishing Umoja Center we intend to recover this brilliant legacy of Africanism deeply buried in German historical and cultural prejudice; German prejudice because on this year celebrating the seven hundred and fifty anniversary of the founding of the city of Berlin, nothing at all has been mentioned at all as to the contribution of the African genius to the reservoir of the cultural brilliance of Berlin. At one time the African factor contributed to the intellectual efflorescence of this city. One of the tasks of the Umoja Center should be, perhaps, to comprehensively recover the intellectual and cultural legacy bestowed upon us by the example of Anton Wilhelm Amo and W.E.B. DuBois. Equally also, perhaps Umoja Center should make clear to the German nation the importance of these two men in the formation of German spiritual culture.

What could possibly be the political and cultural significance of Pan-Africanism today! The two principal aims of Pan-Africanism, from the moment of its founding in the Caribbean in the late nineteenth-century to its present crisis in the late twentieth-century Africa, have been the aspiration towards the unification of

the African people all over the world and the dislodging and the removal of colonialism from Africa. Only one of the aims has been fulfilled, the defeat of classical colonialism in Africa by the forces of Pan-Africanism. Does it mean therefore that we should abandon and discard Pan-Africanism? I for one do not believe that this anarchistic step of desperation is not necessary at all. I shall make clear in a moment the falsity of this notion of discarding Pan-Africanism. It is clear also that Pan-Africanism has not much succeeded in its second aim, that of possibly bringing the unification of black or African people. This second aim is difficult to realize partly because the quest for its achievement is partly clouded in cultural romanticism. How can one, for example, bring about the unity of black people of Brazil and the black people in Burundi, who live in qualitatively different environments and differently articulated political systems? Even more crucial, what kind of unity are we aiming at, politically, economically or culturally? Or all of them combined? Why has Pan-Africanism failed to bring about real and serious unity among African nations? It is clear from the tragic failures of Pan-Africanism that it cannot fully achieve its aims without fully integrating itself to another philosophy, the political and philosophical system of Marxism. Even the founders of Pan-Africanism were well aware of the serious and potential failure of Pan-Africanism if it did not integrate itself to a form of Marxist philosophy. All of them took different positions on the question or dilemma of Pan-Africanism and Marxism together or Pan-Africanism alone against Marxism.

It is necessary to take a brief look at how each of the founders of Pan-Africanism examined this question or dilemma, for it continues today to be at the center of Africa's political, intellectual, cultural and economic crisis. How did George Padmore, Ras Makonnen, C.L.R. James, Kwame Nkrumah and W.E.B. DuBois deal with this historical problem affecting black people all over the world. How is it possible to unentangle ourselves? But for the moment, a few words on the positioning of the classical founders of Pan-Africanism.

Though perhaps it should be one of the tasks of Umoja Center in a late Seminar to examine this historical conundrum more thoroughly, a brief sketch here can be drawn indicating the fascinating contrasting positions of the classical figures of Pan-Africanism in relation to the enigmatic dialectic between Pan-Africanism and Marxism. The most fascinating pole of contrastive and changing positions is that between George Padmore's despairing abandonment of Marxism-Leninism and Kwame Nkrumah's equally despairing passionate embrace of Marxism-Leninism. Padmore re-embraced Pan-Africanism while Nkrumah abandoned it forever, towards the end of his life. What explains this remarkable contrast of positions? Though located at different historical moments and propelled by different sociological factors, they fascinatingly convey the same despairing historical imagination. The political moment of this contrast should be indicated.

It should be remembered that it was while working in the top bureaucratic structures of the Communist International that Padmore became disillusioned with Marxism-Leninism. The circumstances were as follows: it was while working within the Communist International that Padmore became aware that it was subordinating the political and historical interests of colonially dominated people and black people to the foreign interests of the Soviet state. Padmore refused to accept this, and subsequently left the Communist Movement. Without doubt, the criticism of Padmore of the Communist International was absolutely correct for it displayed a remarkable intellectual integrity. But the grave political mistake committed by Padmore was to confuse Stalinism with Marxism. Definitely Stalinism emerged out of Marxism, but by no stretch of the imagination are they similar things. It is not surprising that C.L.R. James, then deeply mired in Trotskyism, was to applaud the action of Padmore, for he correctly saw it for what it was, namely the break with Stalinism which Padmore confused with Marxism. James himself was later to abandon Trotskyism, though he never left the tradition of Marxism. Both the historical examples of George Padmore and C.L.R. James indicate clearly and without doubt, that both Stalinism and Trotskyism have nothing to offer African people in Africa and in the African diaspora except misery and despair. When the voluminous work of C. L.R. James, which is truly great indeed, is shed of its metaphysics and romanticizing of Trotskyism, it becomes a great monument to the rationality of Marxism and its possible synthesis with Pan-Africanism. It is perhaps in the great writings of James that one day the fundamental key to the problematic of the possible synthesis of Pan-Africanism and Marxism will be found. No doubt, this possible synthesis will be made realizable when it is approached from the perspective represented by the historical writings of DuBois. To be sure, this whole dynamic will be within a particular historical conjuncture revealing very complex sociological intractables. But to return to Padmore: it is clear that he was incorrect to pose the question of Pan-Africanism or Communism, the real and correct question would have been Pan-Africanism or Stalinism!

In contrast to George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah, after his overthrow in Ghana by the combined forces of imperialism and internal reaction, despairingly embraced Marxism-Leninism. Though it is not of immediate relevance to this sketch, it is clear that Nkrumah partly brought about the disastrous conditions in Ghana that made possible his overthrow, namely the construction of many prestigious projects which had no immediate structural and organic relevance to the comprehensive and cohesive development of the country, and the dismissal of a Chief Justice by Nkrumah when the former had made a judicial decision which the latter found unacceptable and untenable. It is to the lasting tribute and integrity of James that he wrote an emotional letter to Nkrumah requesting him, in fact demanding, that he should reverse his decision and apologize to the country for this mistake. Nkrumah never responded to James's letter; it is widely

believed that it was this letter which brought a total breach between these two classical figures of Pan-Africanism. That James was correct is beyond dispute and argumentation.

So Nkrumah shifted to Marxism-Leninism upon observing from Conakry the traumas and wounds capitalism was inflicting on Africa. Nkrumah was correct to have chosen socialism over capitalism. The grave mistake committed by Nkrumah was to have chosen socialism as defined by other men in different continents under different circumstances., the very thing against which Fanon had warned the Third World to avoid. The fate of socialism as the twentieth-century unfolds towards its close clearly shows that this historical construct is evolving in midst of severe complications. The position taken by Nkrumah has to the African people the question of Leninism. If for us in Africa today there are no sacred cows in matters of political philosophy, it is precisely because Africa is in a debilitating state of severe crisis. Africa is at the point or brink of total destruction. This must not be allowed to happen. To save Africa perhaps an element of iconoclasm is necessary. But back to the sacred cow of Leninism. It is clear today, with the help of historical hindsight and Marxist historical research, that Nkrumah was mistaken in accepting the whole of Leninism uncritically. Why is this so? It is because while Leninism as a political and philosophic doctrine (i.e. theoretical construct) exemplified for example in **The State and Revolution** is a prodigious extension to the monumentality of the social geography of Marxism, as a political practice in overthrowing a stable capitalist state, it has not as yet met the real test of history. Leninism as a political practice overthrew a feudal Czarism and not a bourgeois capitalist state. This is one of the fundamental lessons to be drawn from Antonio Gramsci's **The Prison Notebooks** and Perry Anderson's **The Lineages of the Absolutist State** . It is the difference in overthrowing a capitalist state or a feudal state, that compelled Gramsci to theorize and make a distinction between a 'war of position' and a 'war of manoeuvre' in order to articulate this historical complex. Anderson's historical writings have shown the historical and political correctness of Gramsci's genial intuitionism. Leninism in its unadulterated state has severe limitations in so far as its applicability in Africa today. We in South Africa are confronting internal colonialism, but in a real sense a neo-fascist capitalist state suffering periodic bouts of collective suicide, which is just as well. Fanon's salutary warning of a quarter century ago still has its relevance today. Neither Stalinism nor Trotskyism can provide answers at all to Africa's serious problems, while Leninism is very problematical.

In reaction against the Trotskyism of James, the Stalinism of Padmore and the Leninism of Nkrumah, or at least, their residues, Ras Makonnen persisted stubbornly in proclaiming the pragmatism of his Pan-Africanism. What this makes clear is the extraordinary lability of Pan-Africanism, lacking its own

historical grid. It finds itself perpetually pulled by the field force of Marxism, or at least, variants of it. This proves, if proof was needed, the historical inseparability between Pan-Africanism and Marxism. The pragmatism of Makonnen's political philosophy was the only one which was hostile towards historical materialism. The price it has had to pay is the lack of its originality, and in fact, is the least known and the least compellingly attractive. But, paradoxically, it is Makonnen's philosophy of black unity which has sustained the other variants of Pan-Africanism. Perhaps because of its unalloyedness, it seems to have lastingly survived and witnessed the horrendous traumas Africa has been undergoing recently. James's Pan-Africanism has not as yet fundamentally lived in the reality of Africa, esconced as it is in the intellectual climate of triumphalistic cosmopolitanism. Its moment of real confrontation with Africa is still to come.

In fact, what has been characteristic about the pragmatism of Makonnen's philosophy is its petulance and iconoclasm. It has affirmed its rectitude against all reproaches. In the great debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois at the turn of our century as to the kind of education black people shgould have, the perennial dilemma between classical education and industrial education, Ras Makonnen had no qualms in supporting the former. In this, he is agreement with Houston Baker, who in one of his earlier books saw merit in the formulations of Washington on this matter. But the judgement of history has been otherwise.

DuBois represents the most complex metamorphosis of Pan-Africanism within the ambience of Marxist culture. It is clear with hindsight that the historical vision of DuBois projected a synthesis between Pan-Africanism and classical Communism in post-revolutionary Africa. In this, it was totally unique, for the other syntheses postulated a gestational moment between the philosophy of black unity and the theory of history within pre-revolutionary Africa. DuBois steady progression from the early Pan-Africanism to the later Marxism expressed his intention and aim of subsuming Pan-Africanism into the universal process of communist development. Of all the political and philosophical projects within the Pan-Africanist school of thinkers, DuBois's was the most comprehensive and profound, precisely because it was the only one deeply informed of the serious problematics of African history. It is not accidental that it opened the way and path of the great African historical works of Cheikh Anta Diop and Joseph Ki-Zerbo. In fact, DuBois's first book, **The Suppression of the African Slave Revolt**, published in 1896, indicated what one of the central themes of African historiography should be. The real merit of DuBois's historical vision and political practice lies in immersing itself in the structural problems of African history. Until those problems are fully resolved, or at least seriously understood, there can never be any proper synthesis between Pan-Africanism and Marxism,

partly because the Marxism so designated is European Marxism totally imbricated in European historical problems. Umoja Center has to attempt seriously to understand the structural problems of African history which could explain the grave crisis Africa is undergoing today.

It is in theorizing the most central structural problems of African history that Amilcar Cabral founded the tradition of African Marxism. Cabral is, undoubtedly, one of the great thinkers of the twentieth-century. What distinguishes Cabral from the classical thinkers of Pan-Africanism is that his great thought is a product and expression of a revolutionary process. In this, Cabral is similar to Frantz Fanon whose equally brilliant theorizations were formed in the context of a revolutionary process, the Algerian Revolution. Though there are critical differences between the ideological positions of Cabral and Fanon, it is with justification that one can say that both are the founders of African Marxism. The structural complex of African Marxism will one day have to be thoroughly theorized. Umoja Center should be in the vanguard of this revolutionary project of widening and deepening this new and authentic African thought. This is not the moment and the occasion to trace and draw the configurations. . . . [the last two pages of the essay were lost when I moved from West Berlin to Los Angeles in 1989].

1 This was the inaugural address of the founding of the Umoja Center. Umoja Center, founded in late 1987 was a Cultural Association of African Students living in the then West Berlin.