

In Memory of Marcus Garvey: The challenge of Pan Africanism in our time

Written by Dr. Ron Daniels

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I always enjoy writing at this time of the year because it gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to the Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey, arguably the greatest mass organizer people of African descent have produced. Born August 17, 1887 in St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica, Garvey was the founder and President-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL).

Without question he was one of the most effective theoreticians and practitioners of Pan Africanism the world has ever seen. Not only was he a fervent devotee of the idea that people of African descent should unite, he believed that the African homeland must be liberated from European colonial rule and become the base for global Black Power. In one of his more notable declarations he said, "Europe for the Europeans, Asia for the Asians and Africa for the Africans at home and abroad." Beyond the theory of that bold proposition, more than any proponent of Pan Africanism of his time or since, Garvey built a mass based organization which resembled a nation and government in waiting.

Inspired by his message of African redemption, hundreds of thousands of Black people flocked to the UNIA-ACL to establish hundreds of chapters throughout the U.S., Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America and Europe. As a universal symbol of African unity, Garvey developed the Red, Black and Green Flag which remains a part of his legacy today. Indeed, for several years, I have advocated that August 17th be recognized as Universal African Flag Day, an occasion where people of African descent all over the world should display the Red, Black and Green in some form.

I recently had the opportunity to discuss the state of Pan Africanism at the World African Diaspora Union (WADU) Summit in Atlanta. I took the opportunity to suggest that Pan Africanism, the principled unity of people of African descent around the world, is imperative if we are to realize Garvey's vision of Black power. A cursory survey of the world scene clearly indicates that despite ethnic and cultural differences, Europeans have managed to form the European Union and various regional grouping are in formation in Asia.

With the creation of the African Union and the existence of regional organizations like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in East and West Africa there is some progress towards building functional/operational unity on the continent. However, the state of Pan Africanism is a far cry from what is required if the resources of the richest continent on the face of the earth are to be utilized for the development and empowerment of African people on the continent and in the Diaspora.

The problem is that the implementation of Pan Africanism faces a number of obstacles, not the least of which is neo-colonialism, the lack of visionary leadership and ethnic strife. With rare exception, the economies of African nations are still in the stranglehold of the former colonial powers. They have "flag" independence, meaning that the government controls the political sphere but has little control over the most vital aspect of national development - the economy. Kwame Nkrumah, another legendary Pan Africanist and a student of Garvey, warned that neo-colonialism would be the "last stage of imperialism."

Unfortunately, the debilitating process of neo-colonialism is often aided by self-aggrandizing

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leaders who are simply content to hold political office for the purpose of lining their pockets at the expense of the masses of the people. Lacking a vision beyond "national liberation," ending the direct rule of the colonizer, these leaders have not moved their nation to the stage of "national reconstruction" as revolutionaries like Franz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Julius K, Nyerere, Ahmed Sekou Toure and Kwame Nkrumah envisioned it.

National reconstruction is the total "decolonization" of the structures of governance, economy and social systems such that the masses of the people become the beneficiaries of the resources of the nation. For example, it makes no sense for people to be living in unspeakable poverty and misery in the Delta region of Nigeria in the shadow of oil rigs and refineries which fill the coffers of foreign corporations and the bank accounts of corrupt government officials with incredible riches/wealth. We see this sad saga of poverty in the face of abundant natural resources/wealth being played out across the continent.

Dr. Leonard Jeffries reminds us that the process of decolonization must also include the African mind, the creation of an African centered consciousness so that the interests and aspirations of African people are the foremost concern of the leaders of African nations. The lack of African centered vision contributes to the perpetuation of neo-colonialism and renders nations vulnerable to ethnic tensions/strife. Foreign powers are obviously eager to fuel ethnic strife as a means of advancing their political and economic interests. The tragedy is that African leaders are sometimes willing to employ the same scheme in collaboration with foreign powers, or on their own, for personal gain.

Greed and the thirst for power foster the "leader for life" syndrome, where presidents and heads of state are willing to do virtually anything to cling to power, irrespective of the welfare of the people and the nation. Leaders so infected are not likely to want to implement the kind of Pan Africanism that will require yielding a degree of power to a larger body like the African Union to promote the common good of the continent, including holding leaders of member nations accountable.

Marcus Garvey would not likely be pleased with this picture. But just as the Diaspora in his day played a leading role in defining the vision and mission of Pan Africanism, today I believe Garvey would be encouraging the Diaspora, the Sixth Region as designated by the African Union, to lead the way in rearticulating the moral and ethical imperatives of African leadership in the 21st Century. It is the Diaspora which will have to build relations with people based institutions and organizations on the ground throughout the continent as the foundation for compelling leaders to engage the process of "national reconstruction" as the order of the day.

This is an appropriate role for WADU under the wise leadership of veteran Pan Africanist and former Foreign Minister of Jamaica, the venerable Dudley Thompson. We in the Diaspora must once again take the lead in imagining the possibilities of Pan Africanism and connect with our sisters and brothers on the continent in mobilizing/organizing to push African leaders and the African Union to tap the collective potential of African people to achieve Black Power! In the spirit of Marcus Garvey, let our watch words continue to be: "Up you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will!"

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