

10-1-2002

An Assessment of the Plausibility of Pan-Africanism From Various Perspectives

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An Assessment of the Plausibility of Pan-Africanism From Various Perspectives

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SIT: African Diaspora Studies
Fall 2002

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ABSTRACT

The following is my attempt to assess the plausibility and desirability of different levels of Pan-Africanism from the perspectives of Africans and Diasporans. I use historical, cultural and social considerations from both perspectives in my assessment. The observations by the author took place in Ghana between August and November of 2002. Observations from American culture are from the author's experience as an African-American.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For tremendous assistance and support with the conduct of this project, I would like to thank the following:

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for its extraordinary financial and academic support. In particular, Dean Mary Laurita and Dr. Gerald Early at Washington University in Saint Louis. Also, Dr. Victor T. Le Vine for your continued and invaluable assistance.

Dr. Naana Opoku-Agyemang at the University of Cape Coast (Cape Coast, Ghana) for your incredible patience and understanding and for making our time in Ghana as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. Thanks also to the entire Opoku-Agyemang family for opening your home to us and being so generous with your time (and food and space).

‘Uncle’ Eric (Uncle Easy) Quiaye for sharing the comfort of your office:), for all of your time and assistance, and likewise, for being cool peeps.

My project advisor, Dr. Samuel Y. Boadi-Siaw for all of your advice, for reading and rereading my paper day after day, for continually giving me feedback and for sharing your perspective and experience, without which, this project would be much less than what it is.

My interview subjects: Rabbi Kohain and everyone at the Panafest Secretariat in Cape Coast for sharing your vision and for your assistance, IMAHKUS Nzinga of One Africa for welcoming us as family. Also, from the University of Ghana at Legon, Dr. Takyiwa Manu at the Institute of African Studies, Dr. Henry Jackson in the Department of Economics, and Dr. Don-Bright Dzorgbo in the Department of Sociology. Your time and intellectual contributions are greatly appreciated.

Dr. Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang for your advice and the students from English 412 for sharing your time and opinions with us.

The Sarpong-Nsia family for making my time and work away from home as comfortable as possible, for opening your home to me and making me feel more than welcome, and for allowing me the freedom to conduct my life and studies in Ghana such that I got as much out of them as I possible could.

The entire SIT: African Diaspora Studies, Fall 2002 group. And in particular, the Komenda. Takoradi and Accra ‘crews’ for helping to maintain peace of mind and for all of your support and suggestions during this project. It is SO over!!! Holla back.

INTRODUCTION

I began my research into Pan-Africanism in the spring of 2003 as a part of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Minority Undergraduate Fellowship Program at Washington University in Saint Louis. The previous year, my work had focused on the strengths and weaknesses of Afrocentrism as a pedagogic tool. Among the many fundamental components of Afrocentric thought is the idea that black people, no matter where they are found in the world, are descended from ancient African civilizations (specifically that of Egypt) and, as such, should recognize Africa as an ancestral homeland and the accomplishments of African peoples as part of the historical legacy of blacks in the African diaspora.

Much of the debate on the merits of Afrocentric thought hinges on whether such claims can be verified by historical fact, or rather are essentially only wishful thinking on the parts of diasporic blacks. Proponents argue the blackness of ancient Egyptians, citing (among other things) the 'African' facial features found in Egyptian artworks from the era of the pharaohs. Critics point out that some of the most vocal and visible advocates of Afrocentrism, descendants of Africans displaced by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, are in fact not likely to be descendants of ancient Egyptians at all. Rather, the argument is that West African, and not Egyptian civilizations should be the focus of a pedagogy whose aim is to uncover and highlight the pre-European history of blacks in the diaspora.

Thus I came to view Pan-Africanism, in the form of a unified African consciousness, as an essential component of the Afrocentric agenda. If, in fact, there exists on the African continent (particularly in West Africa) a widespread belief in the kinship of all African people, then an Egypt-centered Afrocentrism might very well be a valid historical perspective. If, however, individual ethnic and national identities supercede an/or preclude a common continental identity, then it becomes necessary to recognize particular geographic origins and to focus cultural and historical claims of descent only on those civilizations of which diasporans are verifiable descendants.

This thinking formed the basis of my research as I began to explore the historical and contemporary manifestations of Pan-Africanism on the African continent. In the beginning, I concentrated on the work of Kwame Nkrumah in the interest of African unity. What role did Pan-Africanism (rhetorically and practically) play in the Gold Coast's struggle for independence? Later, given the opportunity to conduct field research in Ghana, I decided to explore the role (if any) that Pan-Africanism plays in contemporary Ghanaian society.

II

I arrived in Ghana with what seemed to be simple enough questions concerning the nature of the relationship (if any) between African-Americans and Ghanaians. I would use my daily observations and interactions to draw conclusions about how I was perceived by Ghanaians and in turn, take note of how I perceived them. Television and radio broadcasts and print media would provide informative examples of the representation of African-Americans in popular Ghanaian culture.

I soon discovered however, that no generic formulation of Pan-Africanism could be used to explain Ghanaians' concepts of race and 'Africanness'. Rather, I would have to start by asking "What is Pan-Africanism to Ghanaiana?" and then, explore if and how Pan-Africanism shapes Ghanaians views of race and the African diaspora.

During the first two months of study (before I officially began my research) I used my own observations and information provided by lecturers at the University of Cape Coast and the University of Ghana at Legon to draw conclusions about the role that Pan-Africanism might play in Ghanaian society. The most influential of my early experiences was the manner in which I was most often received by taxi drivers and other persons I regularly came into contact with. On several occasions I was regarded as a 'nice white lady,' the type of person one might like to take as a friend or a wife. In the beginning, the overwhelming frequency with which I was greeted with "Obronyi (white person), how are you?" by school children seemed evidence enough that the construction of race in Ghana must differ sharply from that in the United States. However, I decided to discard the 'Obrony' phenomenon in the construction of my final question for three reasons: First, language is often not used literally and the word might very well be used to refer to anyone who is considered a foreigner,. Second, my question involves the role of race and not the recognition of different races in Ghanaian society. The perception of light skin as 'white' does not necessarily speak to the role that whiteness plays in Ghanaian thinking and feeling about white people. Finally, I have learned that even some (dark-skinned) Ghanaians are called 'Obronyi' when they are perceived as thinking or behaving in ways that are not considered culturally Ghanaian. Thus the term may obviously be used denote characteristics other than race.

I began to form questions then, concentrating instead on Ghanaian views of dark-skinned African-American experience? What are popular notions of African-American culture? Further along, however, I realized that even these questions were much too

Simple. For example, how do you explore the role of race in a country where race is often not a conscious consideration? How do you identify the construction of Africaness when that construction often happens unconsciously and may be imperceptible to those outside the culture? And how do you question one's views of African-American culture when there is often no recognition of African-Americans as a social group distinct from mainstream America?

Eventually, I found that I was identifying more barriers to my work than I was finding actual examples of Pan-Africanism. Later, during my interviews with scholars and activists living in Ghana I found that, even among proponents of Pan-Africanism, there are actually widely acknowledged shortcomings in what might be called the idea of Pan-Africanism. And so my question (to myself) finally became, "*Why Pan-Africanism?*" With all of the cultural, historical, and geographical distance between Africans and African-Americans, why this insistence on trying to undo history? What practical purpose might be served by some unification of the two?

Of course, the prevalence of the idea of Pan-Africanism in the discourse of African and African-American politics suggests that for some time now, a good number of people have viewed it as a useful means of addressing the issues of the two groups. Indeed, the idea of Pan-Africanism has played a substantial part in the works and rhetoric of some of the most influential black figures of the past century. Kwame Nkrumah dedicated an entire work to it in "*Africa Must Unite.*" Malcolm X was working toward the formal recognition of African-Americans by the OAU at the time of his death. And today, thousands of African descendents are drawn regularly from around the globe to events like Panafest, held bi-annually in Ghana.¹

So, the spirit of Pan-Africanism being alive and well in the lives and rhetoric of diasporic Africans, I've decided to make this study a sort of what some practical applications of Pan-Africanism really might be. In addition to the concept of a global black consciousness, I will look here at smaller, more localized conceptions of the idea in an attempt to determine whether it might actually be used to improve the lives of some group(s) of black people.

And now (when!)... the questions: 1. Might there in fact be practical benefits of Pan-Africanism? If so, what might they be and how could they be achieved? 2. Who would be the beneficiaries (Africans and/or African-Americans)? And 3. Most importantly, is Pan-Africanism itself a practical concept, or simply a nice idea (one that makes black people feel better)?

¹ Rabbi Kohain Halevi. Executive Secretary of Panafest. Interview by author, 6 November 2002, Panafest Secretariat, Cape Coast. Notes in possession of author.

METHODOLOGY

My aim with this project was to explore the plausibility of varying conceptions of Pan-Africanism and to determine which types of conceptions might be most plausible. Using my experience in Ghana as a case study, my points of focus were the relationship between Ghanaians and African-Americans, how that relationship is perceived/represented in Ghanaian culture, and how that relationship might benefit Ghanaians and/or African-Americans.

As I argue in this paper, Pan-Africanism, if it is to have any practical application, must be first and foremost a form of consciousness, specifically a conscious recognition of the relationship I mention above. It should be a way of thinking inherent in the day-to-day conduct and life of a people. For this reason, participant observation comprises the majority substance of this research. As an African-American, questioning the perception of African-Americans, my own interactions with Ghanaians and Ghanaian culture have been most informative about the manner in which the average citizen views me and people like me. Experiences and reactions from other African-Americans living and studying in Ghana are also used to draw conclusions about popular Ghanaian attitudes toward blacks in the Diaspora.

For the most part, I did not initiate conversation with anyone in the culture for the purpose of soliciting information for this paper. (Of course, meetings with Ghanaian advisors and interviewees were conducted for just this purpose.) Most often, I was approached by someone interested in learning about me as a foreigner and used the opportunity to gain an understanding of how they thought of me culturally and racially in relation to themselves. One regular exception though, occurred in my interaction with taxi drivers. I explicitly questioned the prevalence of American flags in the form of air fresheners, graffiti, and window decals that were to be found in the vast majority of the taxis in Cape Coast. The explanations I received are used to support some of the conclusions drawn in this paper.

I have also drawn on information from lectures conducted as a part of the SIT: African Diaspora Studies Seminar between 4 September and 30 October 2002.

For the interview, I met with Rabbi Kohain Halive at the Cape Coast Panafest Secretariat, professors at the University of Ghana at Legon, and with my advisor at the University of Cape Coast (U.C.C.) to pose questions about my own perceptions of the weaknesses of Pan-Africanism in Ghana. At Legon, I consulted with Dr. Takyiwa Manu at the Institute of African Studies, Dr. Henry Jackson in the Department of Economics, and Dr. Don-Bright Dzorgbo in the Department of Sociology. Dr. Samuel Y. Boadi-Siaw in the Department of History at U.C.C. served as my advisor during the official period of independent study. In each instance I asked the interviewee to volunteer any information they thought relevant to my topic and to respond to my

opinions as they thought it appropriate. I also focused one or two questions on the specific area of expertise of the interviewee. Dr. Manu, for instance, was asked about the role of the African Union in fostering Pan-Africanism In Ghanaian society.

In using the information I obtained in interviews, I tried to refrain from generalizing about Ghanaian society based on the experience or “expertise” of one respondent. Most often, I have based arguments on ideas that were recurrent in the responses I received. Other times, opinions expressed by interviewees were used to lend credence to my own experiences in and perceptions of Ghana. Consequently, individuals are not often cited in the text as the sources of particular information or ideas. Each of my interview subjects appears in the Bibliography.

In addition to securing the advice of Dr. Boadi-Siaw, I have also maintained contact with advisors at Washington University in Saint Louis (U.S.A.). Dr. Victor Le Vine in the Department of Political Science and Dean Mary Laurita of the College of Arts and Sciences served as unofficial advisors during the 3 ½ months of observations and 1 month period of official research.

Finally, on 21 November 2002, I conducted a survey in the English 412 seminar at the University of Cape Coast. Students were shown seven photographs and asked to identify the race of the person in each photograph. The skin color of the persons in the photographs ranged from white to dark brown. Students were also asked, among other things, to identify their own race and the race of the persons who colonized the Gold Coast. The purpose of the survey was to gain an understanding of how race is perceived/constructed in Ghana. In analyzing the data from the surveys, I ran into several problems.

First, respondents most often identified dark-skinned individuals (and themselves) as “Black” or “African” and lighter-skinned individuals as “Black American” or “African-American.” This suggested to me that perhaps Ghanaians would tend to identify dark-skinned persons as like themselves and lighter-skinned persons as more Americanized or foreign. However, the use of “American” to qualify the race of light-skinned persons might very be an objective reference to perceived country of origin and not involve race at all. There’s no way to know if the inclusion of “American” renders one less “African” or simply African and American. After all, both dark-and light-skinned persons were described as Black or African in some way. Also, to be fair, the overwhelming majority of dark-skinned people one encounters in Ghana are indeed simply “Black or “African”. The overwhelming majority of light-skinned people one encounters may be neither. It is only natural then that Ghanaians might assume such racial identities. I decided that the descriptor “American” did not really tell me much about how respondents viewed the race of the persons they described as Black or African American.

Then, I realized that the ultimate aim of the survey was to discover the role that one's skin color plays in whether or not a Ghanaian will tend to identify them as being like himself. In fact, I could not know if 'race' was the means by which Ghanaians decided who is like and unlike themselves. Perhaps I should have used "ethnicity" or "**nationality**" or even "**skin color.**" **Perhaps I should have asked "Which of these people do you most identify with?"** Even if race as it is known in America plays a substantial role in Ghanaian life, the *language* with which it is discussed might be very different. I had no way of determining if the question my respondents were answering was in fact the question I intended to ask. In the end, I decided that flaws in the construction of the survey would not allow me to draw the conclusions I needed to support my argument. Nonetheless, the details of this survey are included with full results in Appendix 1.

As a result of the faults with my survey research, I thought a roundtable discussion with student at U.C.C. might allow me to better access the information I wanted. However time and scheduling restraints did not permit the conduct of such a discussion. Ultimately, I was not able to draw substantial conclusions about race construction in Ghana. It therefore does not play a major role in my argument. I simply assert that race construction may very well be a significant factor in determining the plausibility of Pan-Africanism.

As for other weakness in my methods of research, my lack of fluency Ghanaian languages admittedly created a language barrier and limited my pool of potential interviews. While I did interact with non-English speaking persons quite often, I of course was not able to pose specific questions about Pan-Africanism or the views of the Diaspora. Therefore, to the extent that my views have been influenced by the opinions of persons I consulted for this work, it may be more representative of a certain formally educated segment of the population that of Ghanaians in general.

All things considered, I have tried to take advantage of the diverse group of scholars and advisors at my disposal and to use their varied perspectives to ensure the integrity of this work. As I plan to continue my research into Pan-Africanism in the future, it is certainly a work in progress. I do hope however that the information I have uncovered thus far adequately supports the conclusions I have drawn below.

Amidst all the disagreement surrounding the plausibility of Pan-Africanism, one thing about which most scholars agree is that there is actually no universally accepted definition of what Pan-Africanism is.² Most works on the subject, therefore, begin with a statement of the author's own definition of the term. It can denote anything from world-wide unification of black people to something as simple as a celebration of shared cultural heritage between African and Diasporans.

² Williams, Michael. "The Pan-African Movement." *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora*. 2nd Edition. P. 169-181. Carikuna Academic Press, Durham NC, 1998.

In this work, I explore the relative plausibility of each and argue that while problematic in its most extreme form, Pan-Africanism is quite plausible and even desirable in a more moderate and localized form. Specifically, I advocate a conscious recognition of cultural and historical ties between West African-Americans. Elements of Ghana and Ghanaian culture will serve as examples of possible aids and barriers to this form of Pan-Africanism in Africa. Likewise, examples are drawn from African-American culture to represent possible aids and barriers in the Diaspora.

As I stated in the Introduction, my research began and has evolved as a study of the role that 'Africa' does and should play in the academic and cultural lives of blacks in the Diaspora. Of course, there are advantages to a geographically conceived Pan-African union, one that would serve the particular political and economic interests of the continent. However, my personal interests as a member of the Diaspora and the quality of my research environment have been much more conducive to a study of the relationship between people like myself and the people of West Africa. Thus, my original concept of Pan-Africanism, a union of African peoples across the continent, is neglected here in favor of the alternative conception, a union of West African people and Their descendents in the Diaspora.³

The fundamental premise here is that the conduct of the trans-Atlantic slave trade resulted in a cultural and historical break between groups of African people. The cultural component of the break will be treated as 'minor' and the historical component as 'major.' I will identify evidence of the break in both Ghanaian and American societies and suggest ways in which African-Americans in particular might benefit from a closing of the gap. Finally, I will survey potential barriers to Pan-Africanism between African-Americans and Ghanaians and explore the plausibility of overcoming those barriers.

³ This is a reference to the "existence [in West Africa] of a unified African consciousness" vs. "a [recognition of] particular geographic origins and [a] focus [of] cultural and historical claims of descent only on those civilizations" as stated in the Introduction.

MAJOR AND MINOR RIFTS

History

Since the separation of African peoples is a historical phenomenon, it is only right that history play a major role in overcoming that separation. Of all the obstacles on the road to Pan-Africanism, none is so fundamentally crippling as *the problem of history*. In any historical discourse, one is likely to come across any number of mantras declaring the importance of the past in determining a people's future ("If you want to know where you 're going, you have to know where you come from." "Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it." "Sankofa: Go back and take it."⁴ Etc.) The problem where African-Americans are concerned is that "history" in America does not begin until their arrival as slaves in the New World. Conversely, "history" in Ghana all too often ends with their departure from the coast of West Africa. The transition from African to African-American is not included in either edition.

It is this transition which I believe accounts for much of the historical and cultural representation (or non-representation) of African-Americans.

To explain, in the curricula of the America compulsory education, the lives of black people before their existence as slaves is almost entirely (if not entirely) absent. Likewise, the existence of social and political institutions in West Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans is neglected. Thus, in the popular history of African-Americans, they appear most often not as displaced African in America, but as a lesser class of American people. African-America, so to speak, began as a nation of slaves that have since been emancipated and integrated into the larger culture. I believe that this type of history accounts for much of what has been perceived and recorded as the cultural and intellectual handicap of African-Americans.

As an example, in the United States, the subject of Ebonics, or Black English, has been attracting increasing attention and controversy in academic and cultural circles for its implication that the strain of English spoken by African-Americans is in fact not a dialect, but a language. Some critics argue that Black English is simply improper or 'broken' American English. Proponents of Black English as a language point out that while outsiders may perceive the grammatical construction of Black English as 'broken', it does have rules and norms of usage as are found in any recognized language. My point here is not to argue the merits of Black English as a language, but to suggest that language may be one instance in which history can be used to undo the perception of African-Americans as deficient or 'broken' in some respect.

⁴ References to maxims in American and Ghanaian culture.

In doing so, I must first raise the contention that language, and more importantly, language usage are learned both formally and informally over the course of a person's lifetime. Formal education through schooling and informal education through socialization both shape and ultimately determine one's patterns of speech. Thus, in addressing what I contend is a misconception, the linguistic deficiency of African-Americans, we might look first to the roots of African-American education in the United States.

In particular, during slavery in the Southern States, the education and literacy of blacks was illegal and punishable in any number of ways, including death.⁵ For the majority of their existence in America, the only form of education allowed to African-Americans was the informal education of socialization. The histories of enforce and normalized segregation in the United States explain why African-Americans have historically been (and sometimes continue to be) socialized almost entirely amongst themselves. Speech patterns are therefore very effectively passed from one generation to the next. One can imagine that during slavery, while blacks in America were barred from formal education, though they may have been socialized to a degree by whites, they were certainly never tutored to the point of an articulate mastery of Standard English. Rather, from the arrival of the African on the shores of New England, he need only master from English to that degree which allowed him to understand and respond to another's commands. As for the English spoken amongst the slaves, it conceivably became a blend of American and African grammatical structures.

Furthermore, when we consider that the formal indoctrination of standard vocabulary, spelling and grammar are compulsory during one's primary schooling in America, it is clear that formal education plays a substantial role in the mastery and perpetuation of Standard English. Such education is only more important when the learner is not a native speaker or a child learning its first language, but a foreigner with his own very different ways of using and constructing language. And so, Black English began and has ostensibly been passed down as the linguistic reaction of West Africans to the imposition of a foreign language. It is therefore not a broken English, but rather a version of English that, in the absence of formal education, never coincided with and should not be viewed as deviating from Standard English. In truth, Black English is not more improper American English (and is arguable less so) than American English is improper British English.

The objection may be made that the persistence of Black English in a time when African-Americans had arguably been granted equal access to formal education is in fact evidence of an inability to master Standard English. Such an objection would be a

⁵ Dr. Leslie Brown. Professor of African-American Studies and History. Personal letter to Crystal Holmes. 26 November 2002. Letter in possession of author.

misunderstanding of my aim. I am not arguing the capacity of African-Americans to learn or making any claims of intelligence. I am simply suggesting that the character of Black English cannot be used as evidence of an incapacity or lack of intelligence. As for the objection itself, I would respond by pointing out that the two (Black and Standard English) are not mutually exclusive. With participation in black culture and the experience of formal education, many people can and do master both patterns of speech.

So here we have one example of how history can speak to contemporary social and cultural issues of African-Americans. It is the gap in the historical record that may be to blame for some of the misunderstanding of African-American people and culture. It is the representation of blacks in America not as people whose language was changed, but as people who were never fluent in any language that may account for the view of Black English and speakers of Black English as lower class or uneducated. Here, a more Pan-African view of history might very well help to settle some portion of the black-white cultural conflict that exists in contemporary American society.

Speaking of American culture generally, the revision of popular American history to include a more accurate representation of a very prominent segment of its population is certainly a worthwhile cause. Contending that education is a widely accepted American value, I propose that the inclusion of some African history or at least of some African-American history in what is considered 'American History' cannot help but further the cause of education. Furthermore, whether or not education is in fact an American value, the almost instinctive apprehension with which many Americans (and African-Americans) view Africa is evidence of the need for increased understanding of Africa and African peoples.

Culture

With regard to culture, the width of the gap between Ghanaians and African-American very much depends on the experience of the person measuring that gap. In a group of 8 African-American students, living and studying together day in and day out for 3½ months, some have been struck by overwhelming similarities that persist between the two cultures. Others, having found the differences far greater than the similarities have concluded that, "Africans and African-Americans are just two different people."⁶ Certainly, in all fairness, there are cultural similarities between the two. Of course, African-American culture, with the influence of American culture, has evolved along its own unique path over the last five centuries. Consequently, there are in fact noticeable differences in the cultures of African-

⁶ References to the 8 African-American in the School for International Training (SIT) African Diaspora Studies Fall 2002 Program

Americans and the people from whom many of them might very well be descended. These differences likely explain some of the disillusionment that many African Americans feel at the first experience of Ghana.

It is no secret that African-Americans do often enough, and have for some time now, traveled to West Africa with designs of 'going home.' Back to Africa movements existed as early as the 1700s.⁷ Whether what they actually experience is more a return home or a culture shock depends largely on which aspects of cultures weigh most heavily on one's experience. For some, the familiar arts, sounds, and styles of worship are enough to make them feel as if they are visiting long lost relatives. For others, the differences far outweigh any similarities and make them feel much more like a foreigner than a returnee. It is these differences that I refer to as a cultural break and will elaborate on here.

First, while non-vocal interaction in the forms like dance and worship may play a substantial role in confirming cultural roots, speech undoubtedly figures quite prominently in one's interaction with the host culture. Here, language becomes the first point of separation between Ghanaians and African-Americans. Even when conversation is conducted in English the structural differences between American and Ghanaian English can be impediments to effective communication.

Speaking of interaction in general, community structure and norms of social obligation often differ sharply between African-Americans and Ghanaians. To be fair, the extended family structure found in Ghana is not quite unlike the concept of extended family in the African-American community. The identification of non-blood relations as 'aunts', 'uncles' or 'cousins' is actually quite common. However, one's relationship to the community outside the extended family arguably differs sharply between the two groups. There is a level of individualism inherent in American culture, and subsequently in African-American culture, that is almost if not altogether absent in Ghanaian culture. The idea that anyone whom you have never met and are not genetically related to is a stranger and should be regarded with caution is pervasive in the United States. In Ghana, however, particularly among the Akan, one may at first introduction address another as 'sister'/'brother' and proceed to ask about details of his life. The sense of interpersonal entitlement implicit in Akan society contrasts sharply with the social experiences of many African-Americans.

Another example of differences in one's relationship to community is the role that strangers may play in the socialization of children in Ghanaian society. On more than one occasion, the SIT group was approached by children who had wandered away from their

⁷ Williams, Michael. "The Pan-African Movement" *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora* 2nd edition. P. 169–181. Carolina Academic Press, Durham, NC, 1998

parents and were subsequently engaged by my classmates and I. We were never chastised for picking up someone else's children or told that it might be inappropriate. On more than one occasion, parents felt comfortable enough with us handling their children to walk away and leave them in our care. In some instances, we had to go so far as to follow after parents who had gone away in an effort to return their children to them. Such tacit and explicit trust in another's interest in caring for your child is almost unheard of in American culture. It certainly is even less common when the 'other' in question is a visitor to your country and not a familiar member of one's community.

Accordingly, it can be somewhat awkward for first-timers to navigate the most basic interactions in Ghana. Questions like how to react when someone takes your hand or places an arm around you become issues of cultural relativism and sensitivity. Something as simple as declining another's initiative at conversation can be made increasingly difficult by a fear of giving offense. So while African-American culture has apparently retained some elements of its West African roots, in other ways it has become much more American than African.

Finally, and perhaps most detrimentally, there has been a break in the perception of African-Americans as Africans. As indicated by Rabbi Halevi, a Pan-African activist living in Ghana for over 10 years, African-Americans are often perceived not as returned Africans, but as foreigners to serve as potential resources.⁸ A common experience of African-Americans in Ghana has been the difficulty of securing goods services at regular prices (the prices charged to Ghanaians). There is a tendency to group African-Americans with other groups of tourists with excess money to spend in Ghana. Halvei stresses the need for Africans and African-Americans to serve as mutual resources to one another. Indeed, African-Americans have access to economic and social resources that might be used to benefit Ghana. Likewise, Ghanaians in many ways hold the keys to the cultural and historical roots that so many African-Americans seek to uncover.

From all of this springs the argument that Pan-Africanism in a global sense must be first and foremost a form of consciousness. There must be a formal recognition of the interests to be served by some reunification of Africans and Diasporans. Otherwise, there is no motivation to invest the energies necessary to overcome (or overlook) existing historical and cultural differences. So what are the prerequisites to the formation of such a consciousness? In the next section, I propose two such prerequisites and explore the possibility of achieving each.

⁸ Rabbi Kohain halevi. Executive Secretary of Panafest. Interview by author, 6 November 2002, Panafest Secretariat, Cape Coast. Notes in possession of author.

PREREQUISITES OF GLOBAL PAN-AFRICANISM

Race Consciousness

It is my contention that the most important of all prerequisites to an inter-continental (as opposed to strictly African) Pan-Africanism is race consciousness. If groups of people are to be motivated to unite across national, ethnic, religious, and geographic lines, they must possess some common characteristic interest which can be viewed as outweighing all of these distinctions. That common characteristic between Africans and Diasporans is race. The one element of 'Africanness' that many Diasporans have undoubtedly retained is 'blackness'. Where tradition, language, history, religion, and specific geographic origin may have been forever lost, skin colour remains as a constant reminder of one's genetic link to Africa.⁹ Thus, the most important prerequisite to unity between Africans and Diasporans is an acknowledgement of the thing that they most arguably have in common: race. An institution of Pan-Africanism must be preceded by an acceptance of race as appropriate grounds on which to form ties. Looking at the role/non-role of race in Ghanaian and African-American societies, I argue that this component of Pan-Africanism poses particular problems to its realization.

As previously stated, Pan-Africanism in this paper is treated as some form of union of African and diasporic African people. It is a concept based on the shared identity of those people. That shared identity is, of course, African identity. This implies that the African ancestry of African-Americans somehow supercedes the portion of European (White American) ancestry that most of them undoubtedly have. Why the emphasis on one's African identity?

One possible explanation is the non-consensual means by which many (if not most) African-Americans have come to be products of mixed ancestry. From the beginning of the black experience in America, race mixing occurred most often not in the form of marriage, but of intercourse between master and slave. The children of such unions often were not accepted as whites in the mainstream society and therefore continued to mix and reproduce with the black population. Thus, African-Americans have become a people whose skin complexion ranges from arguably white to very dark. In popular discourse, the entire group may be referred to as "black."

Ghanaians, by contrast, are a fairly homogenous group. While there is some variation in skin colour, the range is not nearly as wide as among African-Americans. More importantly, there is no "other" or majority racial group in Ghana to which black Ghanaians

⁹ The case of light-skinned Diasporans poses a problem of race construction that will be addressed later in this section

must contrast themselves. In terms of classifying and dividing people race is essentially a non-factor. There is no multiplicity of races amongst which to establish a hierarchy. So the racialism endemic in American culture might quite logically be absent from Ghanaian culture.

Where race in the United States has continued to play a considerable role in almost every area of national life, it appears to have little significance in a country where there are no racial distinctions to be made. Here, in my opinion, the burden of proof falls on advocates of global Pan-Africanism to demonstrate the impact of race on the lives of people for whom it might ostensibly never be a factor. The value of race as a social, political, and /or economic tools cannot be assumed in a global context but must be illustrated from the perspective of the people with whom one seeks to unite racially.

I have doubts that this burden of proof can be met. I believe that race as a consciousness cannot be taught, but rather results from a lifetime of racialized experiences; that it is as many allege, a social construct. So how do you implant it in a society that has not apparently developed any need for it? In the same way that one's socialization can dictate the formation of national and religious identities. I believe that it dictates the formation of racial identity. How else can one explain that different societies construct race differently and an individual might be at once black and white depending on the society in which he is being judged? This is not to say that there are not real phenotypical differences between black-and white-skinned persons. It is only to say that the salience of those differences is established during the racial experiences of a person's lifetime. A person who has never been made conscious of skin colour might just as easily be convinced that eye colour or religion or nationality are appropriate grounds along which to unite or divide people.

The argument could be made that the role of race in histories of racial oppression (perhaps colonialism) can be used to suggest ways in which it is still salient. This argument is problematic for the very reason that Africans and Diasporans find themselves separated. "History" has treated the two groups very differently. Ghanaian and African-American memories of what history calls "slavery" for instance are quite different. Where history might justify the racialism found in American culture, Ghanaians may be hard pressed to find, in their experience of "slavery" or colonialism, justification for the type of racial allegiance many Pan-Africanists want.

In the text section, I look at the conduct and memory of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade as the historical event that created much of the Diaspora. I also look to the varied impacts of history and how it may explain many of these differences in contemporary lives of West

Africans and Diasporans. First however, I suggest one another area of life that move prove to be problematic to a global Pan-Africanism.

Race Construction

As explained in the Methodology, I am not able at this time to draw substantial conclusions about how race is constructed in Ghana. However, I can argue that similar constructions of race across cultures is necessary to the unity of persons along racial lines. If Pan-Africanism is to be a union of African people, there must be some uniform way of determining who is African enough to be included. Diasporans are no longer the easily and universally recognizable Africans that they were at the time of their removal from the continent. Thus the construction of race, specifically of blackness or Africanness, is of primary concern. The self-identified blacks or Africans in the Diaspora must be accepted as such by Africans on the continent. This, too, may be problematic as a result of the variety of ways in which history has affected African societies. And so, I move on to explore that history.

THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY

In the separation of continental and diaporic Africans, no event is so fundamentally important as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. In American culture, 'slavery' is defined popularly as the system under which black people were bound, raped, and murdered by whites in America. The origin of those black people most often is presented only as a monolithic 'Africa' without reference to particular ethnic groups or even regions of the continent (ie West Africa). So 'slavery' in the American context has largely become known as the abduction of subsequent enslavement of blacks from Africa by whites from Europe and the New World.

Conversely, what Western history calls 'slavery' is recorded more in terms of wars and abductions in the histories of Ghanaian people. Except in cases of lectures by university professors, the European component of the phenomenon has been altogether absent from my discourses of the subject in Ghana.¹⁰ Rather, the legacy is one of social insecurity and instability at home. The face of the 'raider' is a black face. I believe that much of the social and political rift between Africa and the Diaspora can be traced back to those conflicting historical representations of slavery. In establishing the causal relationship between the two, I will first explore the actual history of the slave trade as it occurred between West Africa and the United States of America.

The Missing Link?

It is widely acknowledged that by the 4th Century AD, there existed in West Africa the concept of trade in persons in the form of the trans-Saharan slave trade.¹¹ However, 'slave' in this context arguably translates much more accurately as 'servant'. Thus in many societies affected by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, what existed prior to it was more a form of domestic servitude. Excluding the trans-Saharan trade (and even then, there is little evidence of slaves as goods), people were not purchased and sold as slaves, but rather fell under servitude for reasons of gambling, debt, family obligation, or conquest. Often, these 'slaves' became like members of the families that they served, enjoying the rights and privileges of other society members. 'Slaves' could marry outside the family and could not be sold away.¹²

¹⁰ Specifically, this is a reference to the narratives of elders at Kwabeng (4 October 2002), Gwollu (6 October 2002), and Sankana (7 October 2002) regarding the Ghanaian experience of slavery.

¹¹ Dr. Akosua Perbi. "History of Ghana / Slave Trade" Lecture given as part of the school for International Training (SIT): African Diaspora Studies Seminar at the University of Legon, Department of Linguistics. 30 September 2002.

¹² Dr. Benedict Der. "Northern Ghana and the Slave Trade". Lecture given as part of the SIT: African Diaspora Studies Seminar at the University of Cape Coast, Faculty of Arts Conference Room. 15 October 2002.

By the 16th and 17th centuries A.D., growing trade relations between European and West African nations had created increasing dependencies in each group on the goods of the other. Early on, gold was the principal export from the region now known as Ghana. In the mid-1600s the demand for slaves surpassed that for gold and West African nations intent on maintaining trade with Europe had to evolve means of meeting that demand.¹³ What followed was the advent of ‘slave raiding’.¹⁴

During the 1700s, the Asante of West Africa dominated the political and military landscape of the area known as Ghana. In an effort to expand the empire, they engaged in wars of conquest with neighbouring groups. Guns and gun powder from the European traders were key in the success of the Asante over lesser-armed peoples.¹⁵ As the European demand for slaves increased, the Asante began demanding people a payment from the groups they defeated. In 1732, the Asantehene (Asante King) Opoku Ware conquered the Gonja people of the Northern Territory and demanded a tribute of 2,000 persons. The Gonja and other groups, in turn, raided weaker villages and took prisoners to pay tribute to the Asante. Thus, ‘raiding’ became a common method of obtaining people to settle debts of conquest and to trade with Europeans. The practice continued even after the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, with captured persons being sold into ‘domestic slavery’ across West Africa.¹⁶

Once in the New World, the captured people were often disallowed to practice any part of their native cultures. In the United States, African languages were forbidden (although, in a few rare cases like the Gullah of South Carolina, these elements have been preserved). People from the same ethnic group were often separated and scattered throughout the southern states to prevent their conspiring together against their captors. English was the only acceptable language and Christianity was, in most cases, the only administered religion. The beating of drums was often disallowed, though the allowance of song and dance was often viewed as a means of pacifying slaves. This is one of relatively few areas in which some of the cultural heritage of Africa has been preserved in the culture of African-Americans. Over time, most of the individual ethnic identities of slaves and their descendants were lost. Mixing of races and ethnic groups in the United States also accounts for much of the ethnic ambiguity of African-Americans. Within one or two generations of the African’s removals from his homeland, his

¹³ Dr. Benedict Der. “Northern Ghana and the Slave Trade”. Lecture given as part of the SIT: African Diaspora Studies Seminar at the University of Cape Coast, Faculty of Arts Conference Room. 15 October 2002.

¹⁴ Dr. Benedict Der. “Northern Ghana and the Slave Trade”. Lecture given as part of the SIT: African Diaspora Studies Seminar at the University of Cape Coast, Faculty of Arts Conference Room. 15 October 2002.

¹⁵ Lecture by tour guide at Manhyia Palace Museum. Kumasi, Ghana. 12 October 2002. also Dr. Benedict Der, 15 October 2002.

¹⁶ Dr. Benedict Der. “Northern Ghana and the Slave Trade”. Lecture given as part of the SIT: African Diaspora Studies Seminar at the University of Cape Coast, Faculty of Arts Conference Room. 15 October 2002.

descendants became simply black in America. In this way, blacks in the United States were a single people who suffered a common fate at the hands of white people. This is the legacy that would be passed down as history: that of black people taken from Africa and enslaved by white people.

Taking these things into consideration, it is easy to see how the Ghanaian memory of 'slavery' could differ so sharply from its American counterpart. Having no contact with enslaved people in the New World, it is impossible for people on the continent to have known the reality of slavery in America, or perhaps even that the abducted people were fated for 'slavery' and not a servitude comparable to that in their own societies. Knowing nothing of life in the New World, the tragedy of the slave trade was, for most West Africans, that of broken families and destroyed villages.¹⁷ It became a history of war between groups and nations of people on the continent. Having no memory of a life before America, most blacks in the United States knew 'slavery' only as an oppression perpetrated by whites. Theirs is a history of plantations and lynchings in the southern states of America. Each group then, has as its own one half of a complete history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

History and Race Consciousness

One effect of the contrasting experiences of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is the black-white dichotomy that dominates in black American culture but seems to be almost absent from popular Ghanaian culture. The representation of White America and European imperialism as a sort of enemy permeates the culture and historical studies of African-Americans. The clash between 'black' and 'white' is the defining characteristic of the black experience in the United States.

In contrast, many of the people who suffered through centuries of raidings may never have seen a white face. The legacy of slavery in Ghana, therefore, does not appear to have taken on the connotation of racial conflict that it has in the Diaspora. Accordingly, the animosity toward America and Britain that can still be found in some aspects of black American culture seems to have little or no place in Ghanaian culture. America, in particular, is overwhelmingly more popular among blacks in Ghana than among their counterparts in the

¹⁷ Dr. Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang. "Cape Coast Castle" Lecture presented as part of the SIT: African Diaspora Studies Seminar at the home of Dr. S. Kwadwo and Naana Opoku-Agyemang, University of Cape Coast. 4 September 2002.

United States. Even the reputation of Britain, the former colonial power, does not seem to have suffered very much as a result of its relationship with the people of West Africa.

For example, in the markets of Cape Coast, the British and American flags feature prominently in advertisements. They're also quite popular among cab drivers.¹⁸ The frequency with which Ghanaian students and professionals immigrate or attempt to immigrate to the United States also suggests that it figures fairly positively at least in the minds of young (upwardly mobile) Ghanaians.¹⁹ In addition to all of this, it might be said that the conception of slavery in the New World explains why the majority of Pan-African literature seems to originate in the Diaspora. It makes sense that the people for whom race had been most salient should find the most cause to unite along racial lines.

¹⁸ From the author's experience in Cape Coast, Ghana from 27 August through 17 October 2002.

¹⁹ Dr. Henry Jackson. Lecturer of Economics. Interview by author, 15 November 2002, University of Ghana at Legon. Notes in possession of author. Also, Dr. Takyiwa Manu. Director of the Institute of African Studies. Interview by author, 15 November 2002, University of Ghana at Legon. Notes in possession of author.

History and Race Construction

Given the general lack of knowledge about the reality of slavery in the Diaspora one might expect to find very different constructions of race in some African and Diasporan cultures. Without an understanding of the history of racial mixing (particularly the rape African women by white slave owners) it is difficult to conceive of persons with light or white skin as descendants of Africans. Strictly speaking, 'light' skin is often closer in actuality to the colour 'white' than it is to 'black'. Thus, it is the inclusion of light/white skin in the category 'black' that would need to be explained (not its exclusion by black-skinned people on the continent).

That explanation comes in the form of the racial oppression suffered universally by descendants of African people in the United States. Historically, the "one-drop rule"²⁰ rendered anyone with known black ancestry 'black', regardless of one's own skin colour. Thus, even some white-skinned persons were nominated and treated as black by whites in America. And so, black Americans became a race of people whose only criteria for membership was some 'African' ancestry. Of course, without at least a basic knowledge of the history of slavery and civil rights in the United States, such a construction of race might very well seem highly illogical.

With regards to problems of race consciousness and construction that result from divergent memories of history, one might argue that the teaching of complete history could spawn a sense of mutual interest. Perhaps, for instance, if Africans knew how Diasporans were treated (and sometimes still are treated) by whites, they could be compelled into a sort of Pan-African union of black people. Perhaps, in the interest of their brothers, they might unite with them to fight the racial oppression that persists in many parts of the world. Perhaps they would embrace even the lightest-skinned Diasporans as Africans.

Each of these scenarios, however, presupposes some allegiance to member's of one's own race. Why should Africans care if blacks in the Diaspora are oppressed by whites if they feel no particular allegiance to people who are black? Even if Diasporans were universally accepted as Africans, there is still perhaps no catalyst for a unionization of African people. Often, the universal salience of race is assumed by people on whom it has had an undeniable impact. Race for many people, however, does not play nearly as significant a role as it does for African-Americans and other Diasporans.

And so we are left with race consciousness and race construction as extremely problematic elements of the global Pan-African agenda. On the other hand, if we could

²⁰ Reference to term used in American culture.

conceive of Pan-Africanism in a form that was not dependent on race, perhaps it might be quite plausible. For instance, if the motivating factor were not racial identity by shared history, one might be able to demonstrate the relevance quite well to persons across cultures regardless of contemporary differences in those cultures.

For instance, it might be quite possible to convince Ghanaians and African-Americans that it is in their mutual interest to recognize the portion of history that each acknowledges and the other knows little about. Perhaps, for African-Americans, it would provide some insight into the history before America that is so often lacking. For Ghanaians, there might some piece of mind or other closure that could result from knowing exactly what has become of the relatives and neighbours who were taken away. This would not be dependent on whether or not Ghanaians identified African-Americans as being racially like themselves. The fact is that they are descended from the people who became Ghanaians, even if they are not Ghanaians. History, a complete history, dictates that there is this link. It is not dependent on the nature of either society to sustain it. Here, Pan-Africanism, in a moderate, localized sense, is quite possible. West Africa and the Diaspora have undeniable historical and cultural ties. It is up to them to recognize and embrace those ties and to decide how best it take advantage of them.

CONCLUSION

While the idea of Pan-Africanism has been alive and well in the hearts and minds of some African people for hundreds of years, there have undoubtedly also always been critics of the idea. Nevertheless, a desire for the unification of African people persists in the rhetoric of both the continent and the Diaspora. Of course, there have been some success. And I do not believe that weaknesses in the idea of global unification should deter all attempts at unification. Panafest, the effort of one group of Pan-Africanists working in Ghana, is an undeniably valuable cultural and spiritual experience for the thousands of Africans and Diasporans that attend the event.

So I do not intend to say that the idea of global Pan-Africanism is completely without merit. I have only meant to argue the problems associated with the idea as a global consciousness. As practice, as cultural and historical celebration, we have seen that it can be quite successful.

Likewise, localized attempts with more specific aims (i.e. the teaching of the history of African-Americans) can no doubt have very positive impacts on the lives of Diaporans and Africans. This is where I believe more of the focus of Pan-Africanism should be placed. The Diaspora need not necessarily rely on continental Africans for acceptance and support of its agenda. In reclaiming its history, in acknowledging the source of many of its cultures and traditions, the African diaspora can embrace Pan-Africanism in a way that is not dependent on anything but itself.

Suggestions for Further Study

As I came to the end of this project, I realized that many of the notes I had made for myself during the semester do not appear anywhere in this paper. Many of my own questions are not answered here. In particular, I've observed during my time in Ghana that one part of the population that does seem to have a particularly Pan-African outlook is the Rastafarian population. It might be interesting to explore ideas about race and politics among Rastafarians in Ghana.

Also, living in Ghana, the prominence of urban American culture, specifically black youth culture is immediately evident. Actually, African-American youth culture is remarkable in many societies around the world. The same music and media that saturate popular Ghanaian culture can be found in youth and club culture in Japan and other parts of the world. It would

be interesting to explore the potential of African-American youth culture to promote relations between diasporic and continental Africans.

Finally, I mentioned my inability to gain a clear understanding of race construction in Ghana. For the completion of this study, and for the aid of further research, it would be helpful to find out exactly how that construction occurs. This would like require more than the distribution of uniform surveys among college students. Rather, an open dialogue with Ghanaians, one in which they were comfortable expressing even those ideas that could be hurtful to Diasporans, is essential.

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Appendix

The following are the contents and results of a survey I conducted on 12 November in the English 412 class of Dr. Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang at the University of Cape Coast. The questions appear here just as they did on the form that I distributed to students. I have also attached copies of the photographs. Beside each photograph, I have listed the responses received when respondents were asked to identify the race of the person in the photograph

What course are you following?

What level are you (100, 200, 300, or 400)?

What senior secondary school did you attend?

What country colonized the Gold Coast?

What was the race of the people who colonized the Gold Coast?

What is your race?

What is the race of the person in the picture?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

All 19 respondents indicated that they were following a Bachelor of Arts course. 3 specified that they were English majors and 3 indicated an Education major.

All 19 respondents were level 400 students.

The students indicated a variety of Senior Secondary Schools.

18 respondents indicated Britain /Great Britain as the country that colonized the Gold Coast. 1 person did not respond to that question.

14 respondents listed “white” as the race of the people who colonized the Gold Coast. 2 respondents listed “European”. 3 respondents listed “White European” or “White / European.”

12 respondents identified themselves as “Black” 3 self-identified as “Black African,” 1 as “African’ and 1 as “Negro” 1 person gave no response to that question.



10 - Black
3 - Black American
2 - Negro
2 - African
1 - Black Ghanaian



10 - Black
2 - Caribbean Black
2 - Negro
2 - African
1 - Black Ghanaian
1 - Hessian



- 5 - Black American
- 3 - Black
- 3 - African-American
- 2 - Negro
- 1 - Caribbean
- 1 - African
- 1 - Black African-American
- 1 - Black African



- 5 - Black
- 5 - Black American
- 2 - African
- 2 - Negro
- 1 - African – American
- 1 - South American
- 1 - Black Caribbean
- 1 - Black Liberian



- 7 - Caribbean
- 2 - Negro
- 2 - African-American
- 2 - Black
- 2 - Black American
- 1 - African Black
- 1 - Black Caribbean
- 1 - Afro-Caribbean



- 11 - White Caucasian
- 4 - European, White European
- 1 - Columbian White
- 1 - White Arab
- 1 - Black American



- 13 - White /Caucasian
- 2 - Asian
- 1 - British
- 1 - European / White European
- 1 - White African