

Algeria and the Pan-African Movement

(With Special Reference to the Colonial Period)

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Introduction:

Pan-Africanism was first born in exile, that is in the United States of America and the West Indies. It was in those parts of the world that Pan-African ideas developed throughout the years thanks to the efforts of a great number of Afro-American and West Indian thinkers and leaders. This may be explained by the fact that the process of the Africans' enslavement started a long time before that of their colonisation. It was the African slave who had been uprooted from his homeland and suffered greatly from the ill-treatment of the white masters. The plantation system which was introduced in the New World by the European owners, and which was based on the institution of slavery, made of the African exile a mere means of production.

This situation was likely to generate movements of protest and slave revolts, which indeed had taken place since the sixteenth century in different parts of the New World. These were based on solidarity and unity against the whites' encroachments and protracted injustice, and the retrieval of the Africans' lost freedom. These ideas were later to constitute the pillars upon which Pan-Africanism was built. The movement was, therefore, conceived at the outset to fit the conditions of the New World Africans. The continental Africans' aspirations were somehow excluded from the list of Pan-African objectives, since their conditions were unknown to New World Pan-Africanists.

However, contacts between Africans on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean started to multiply in the twentieth century, when an important number of African students went to the United States in particular to further their studies. This enabled them to discover the conditions of their brothers in this part of the world, and

allowed them to imbibe some Pan-African ideas. In addition, New World Pan-Africanists organised a series of Pan-African congresses after the First World War, under the leadership of William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1867-1963), often referred to as the 'Father of Pan-Africanism.' These congresses helped Pan-Africanism find its way into the African continent.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to know the historical events that served as catalysts for the emergence of Pan-Africanism, in order to understand the ideals that govern this movement.

I - The Historical Origins of Pan-Africanism:

Often referred to as a 'complex and many-sided phenomenon ⁽¹⁾,' Pan-Africanism can be defined as a twentieth century world-wide African consciousness movement, which sought to reclaim the Africans' identity, culture and dignity, wherever they might be⁽²⁾. Contrary to what its name might suggest, this movement was born outside the geographical boundaries of the African continent. It was first conceived in the Americas by a group of theoreticians who were of African descent. The conditions in which the Africans of the New World were living were characterised by humiliation, persecution, discrimination and dependency. This injustice perpetrated by the white men brought about a spirit of solidarity and unity among the African people in the diaspora to withstand the protracted servitude to which they had been reduced since their arrival on the American soil in the sixteenth century.

The discovery of the New World in 1492 was a turning point in world history in general and the African history more particularly. The presence of gold and silver in some regions in this newly-discovered continent, and its suitable soil and climate for the growing of some highly valued tropical crops in the European markets, led to the use of the local Indians to work in mines and plantations. However, this labour force proved soon to be unreliable, for the Indians were not used to the intensive work they were asked to accomplish. Besides, many of them lost their lives during the European conquests or after contracting some new diseases brought from Europe, and against which their bodies were not naturally immunised. This situation created an urgent need for

¹- Langley, *Pan-Africanism and Nationalism in West Africa: 1900-1945*, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 01.

²- For a definition of a 'Pan-movement,' see Clarke, 'Pan-Africanism: A Brief History of An Idea in the African World,' *Présence Africaine*, 1988, 1st Quarterly, No. 145, p. 26.

a reliable labour force, and made the Europeans turn their attention to Africa to meet their needs. Accordingly, by about the 1530s started the Africans' forced mass migration to the Western Hemisphere⁽³⁾.

Many justifications were put forward to account for the Africans' enslavement. The African was seen as a savage, a backward, and, above all, a heathen to be subdued to 'save his soul.' Moreover, many Europeans believed it to be their duty as Christians to enslave Africans, since the black colour of their skin was interpreted as the result of Noah's curse against his son Ham, according to Biblical texts. Because the Africans were believed to be the descendants of Ham, they were condemned to live in servitude as their ancestor, as a divine punishment for the sin he committed⁽⁴⁾.

Trading in slaves proved very profitable for the Portuguese at the beginning, and the other European nations – the Dutch, the English, the French and the Spanish – were soon to take an active part in it. The demand for slaves in the New World was steadily increasing, to reach its zenith in during the 18th century, for a number of reasons. First, New World plantations were continuously growing in size and number. Secondly, the slaves' conditions did not encourage them to multiply by marrying and raising families. Thirdly, winds and currents made sailing from West Africa to the Americas quite easy for ships of that time⁽⁵⁾.

Founding themselves on an alien territory and living a ruthless treatment that was inflicted on them by their white masters, the African slaves realised that their salvation resided in their union. Indeed, to regain their dignity and freedom some slaves had organised some of the most violent slave revolts in the United States and the West Indies since the sixteenth century. The most successful of these revolts was that which broke out in Haiti in 1791 under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture (1746-1803), and ended in the defeat of French troops and the rise of the first black republic in 1804⁽⁶⁾. In addition, some educated Afro-Americans defended the cause of their race through the press, and told the hardships that their fellows had been enduring since their

³- Fage, A History of West Africa, Cambridge University Press, 4th edition, 1969, p. 64.

⁴- For more details about the role of Biblical interpretations in justifying the enslavement of Africans, see Blackburn, The Making of New World Slavery, London & New York, Verso, 1997, pp. 64-76.

⁵- Fage, op. cit., p. 64.

⁶- Geiss, The Pan-African Movement, translated by Ann Keep, London, Methuen and Co. Ltd. 1974, p. 10.

arrival to the American continent. One of them was John Russwurm (1799-1851) who founded the first Afro-American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in 1827 speaking only for black Americans⁽⁷⁾.

This two-form protest – armed and literary – was the result of the African slaves' long psychological and physical sufferings. Not only were they taken away from their families and homelands, but were enslaved and humiliated as well. This bulk of emotions that appealed to solidarity and unity among the exiled Africans favoured the rise of race-consciousness, and gave birth to the first Pan-African ideas that developed into an ideology in the twentieth century.

A work of this scope and size does not allow to deal with the origins of Pan-Africanism in depth, but suffice it to note that slave trade was one of the most important factors which contributed to the conception of this movement. The origin of the term is actually unknown, but many historians agreed that it first appeared in a conference which took place in London in 1900, by a brilliant student from Trinidad called Henry Sylvester Williams (1868-1911), who was about to finish his studies as a barrister⁽⁸⁾. Since that date, Pan-Africanism had been gaining ground as many militants from the diaspora and from Africa joined its ranks, especially after the five congresses that were held after the First World War.

II - Pan-African Developments in Africa After 1945:

From the first Pan-African Congress (Paris, 1919) to the fourth one (New York, 1927), Pan-Africanism had largely remained an Afro-American and West Indian affair. They had all been organised by W.E.B. DuBois and dominated by Africans of the diaspora. The resolutions had almost been all similar, focusing generally on the betterment of the black Africans' conditions throughout the world; the Africans' right to benefit from the resources of their land; the abolition of corporal punishment, slavery and forced labour; the Africans' right for education and participation in the conduct of their affairs⁽⁹⁾. However, a radical change took place in the fifth Pan-African Congress (Manchester,

⁷- Langley, op. cit., p. 19.

⁸- For more details about this figure, see his biography by J. R. Hooker, Henry Sylvester Williams, London, Rex Collings, 1975.

⁹- For the resolutions of the first Pan-African Congress see C. Legum, Pan-Africanism: A Short Political Guide, New York, F. A. Praeger, 1962, pp. 133-134.

1945) with regard to the main objective of the movement. Henceforward, there was no talk about a racial unity, but rather a continental one. The young African radicals who dominated the Congress expressed their wish to unite all the Africans living in Africa into one strong bloc that would form the 'United States of Africa.' This marked the transplantation of the Pan-African movement from the New World to Africa. In addition, the African delegates expressed for the first time their determination to use all possible means – even violence – to gain their independence. The most outspoken figure among these Africans was Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972) who became the first Ghanaian president in 1960.

Nkrumah believed so strongly in the unity of Africa that he became the mouthpiece of Pan-Africanism in Africa, and made of the Gold Coast (later Ghana) a podium for propagating Pan-African ideas. His enthusiasm for the Pan-African movement was due to his long sojourn in the United States (from 1935 to 1945) where he followed Pan-African activities with great interest. His ultimate dream was to make of Africa a united front against western imperialism and neo-colonialism ⁽¹⁰⁾. It is, however, interesting to note that up to the end of the 1940s, the Pan-African movement had been limited to sub-Saharan Africa, and the Pan-African leaders centred their activities upon this part of Africa. North Africa remained aloof from Pan-African developments, as if the Sahara and the Islamic religion acted as obstacles which stood against the spread of Pan-African trends to the northern part of Africa.

The faint contact between North and sub-Saharan Africa before the 1950s was partly due to three main reasons. On the one hand, black Africans were at first hostile to the Arabs, because they had practised slave trade long before the Europeans arrived to Africa, and some colonial powers justified their presence in some African territories by their intention to put an end to the Arab slave trade ⁽¹¹⁾. On the other hand, sub-Saharan Africans looked to North Africa with indifference, because they believed that its people did not suffer from the prejudices and the injustices brought about by the dark colour of the skin, and, therefore, they did not share the same fate of the black Africans. Moreover, the North Africans

¹⁰ - Mazrui & Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa*, London, Heinemann, 1984, p. 62.

¹¹ - *Ibid.*, p. 54.

were more interested in the Arab and the Islamic world with which they shared religious, ethnic and linguistic affinities.

Nonetheless, an important historical event was to play a leading part in changing the attitudes of both the Arabs and the black Africans towards one another, and bridge the gap which had long existed between them. This was the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 under the leadership of the great Arab nationalist Djamil Abdul Nasser (1918-1970). After the success of his revolution, Abdul Nasser committed himself to the Africans' cause. He gave material and moral support to many nationalist movements throughout Africa, and offered military training to several liberation groups. As a result, new ways were cleared out for communication between Africans on both sides of the Sahara ⁽¹²⁾. Henceforward, Arab North Africa was invited to attend the Pan-African meetings that were convened in different parts of Africa to discuss African issues.

Algeria had manifested an interest in Pan-African activities long before the Egyptian Revolution took place, at a time when contacts between North Africans and Africans south of the Sahara desert had been quasi-nonexistent.

III – Algeria and the Great Pan-African Gatherings:

Algeria's involvement in Pan-Africanism took place at an early stage despite the hard colonial conditions. An Algerian participant attended the proceedings of the first Pan-African Congress in Paris, in 1919, which was organised by W.E.B. DuBois. Although neither the identity nor the activities of this 'delegate' are known, he marked the Algerians' awareness of their African belongingness and their interest in what was happening in their continent ⁽¹³⁾. Solidarity between Algerians and black Africans grew throughout the years, and even intensified in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Algeria had been present in all the Pan-African conferences, which had been held since 1958, either through delegates or through her issue.

The First Conference of Independent African States was organised by Kwame Nkrumah, who was then Ghana's Prime Minister, in Accra in 1958 from 15 to 22 April ⁽¹⁴⁾. Although Algeria did not attend this conference, the African delegates affirmed in their declaration the Algerians' right for self-

¹² - Ibid.

¹³ - Geiss, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

¹⁴ - For the resolutions passed in this conference see Legum, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-148.

determination, and assured their willingness to exert all possible effort to hasten their independence. Besides, they dealt with the Algerian issue in the third resolution, which clearly stated the Africans' full support of the Algerians' fight for independence.

Five hundred delegates from all Africa attended the Cotonou Congress, which was held from 25 to 28 July 1958. Although the congress was not meant to be Pan-African, it nevertheless proved to be more Pan-African than the Accra Conference, because of the important number of participants and the issues dealt with. Like in the previous conference, the Algerian question dominated the proceedings, and the delegates condemned the employment of black troops in overseas military operations⁽¹⁵⁾.

From 5 to 13 December of the same year, another conference was held in Accra: the First All-African Peoples Conference. Algeria was represented by Bensalam who held the post of the vice-chairman of the conference, in addition to Ahmed Boumendjel and Omar Fanon as delegates of the National Liberation Front (*F.L.N.*)⁽¹⁶⁾. The participants protested against French colonial policies in Algeria and other African territories, and the use of African soldiers against their brothers in other colonies. They also drew attention to the denial of the franchise for Algerians in particular, and Africans in general⁽¹⁷⁾.

A delegation from the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (*G.P.R.A.*) attended the proceedings of the Monrovia Conference of Foreign Ministers of Independent African States which was held from 4 to 8 August, 1959. A resolution was passed on the war in Algeria in which the African delegates confirmed the continuation of diplomatic action in favour of the Algerian nationalist cause and the provision of material aid to Algeria. They also agreed to proclaim the 1st November as Algeria Day in reference to the date of the beginning of the Algerian Revolution⁽¹⁸⁾.

The Second All-African Peoples Conference took place in Tunis from 25 to 30 January 1960. In this gathering, the participants expressed again their solidarity with the Algerian people, and their opposition to France's policy of deportation, torture and genocide against the civilians and the militants in Algeria. They also opposed the French authorities' intention to

¹⁵ - Decraene, *Le panafricanisme*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1976, pp. 46-48.

¹⁶ - *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁷ - Legum, *op. cit.*, pp. 228-236.

¹⁸ - *Ibid.*, pp. 165-169.

carry out nuclear test in the Sahara. Moreover, they assured their full moral and material support for the Algerian Revolution, and accepted the request of the *G.P.R.A.* to help in the war effort against French colonial troops⁽¹⁹⁾.

In the Second Conference of Independent African States that was convened in Addis Ababa from 15 to 24 June 1960, Algeria (which was represented by Mohammed Yazid) was admitted as full member. It was the result of "...the growing success of their [the Algerians'] effective pressure at Pan-African conferences for unqualified support for their struggle⁽²⁰⁾." The first and the second resolutions passed at this conference were devoted to Algeria. Once again, the African participants asserted their continuous support for Algeria; the Algerians' right to self-determination and independence; their continuous support for the Algerian cause at the United Nations; and recommended the withdrawal of all African troops used by the French colonial authorities in Algeria. Besides, an appeal was launched to all the African states to support 'the Algerian rebellion' diplomatically and materially⁽²¹⁾.

The Algerian problem was tackled in the Brazzaville Meeting, which took place from 15 to 19 December, 1960. The meeting resulted in a declaration, which stated, among other things, the necessity of applying the principle of self-determination to the Algerians to enable them to choose their destiny freely. It also urged France to put an end to war⁽²²⁾.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Ferhat Abbas, the *G.P.R.A.* took part in the Casablanca Conference, which was organised from 3 to 7 January 1961. In the resolution passed on Algeria, the African delegates declared their determination to support by all means the Algerian people and the *G.P.R.A.* in their war for independence and to re-enforce African political, diplomatic and material aid to the *G.P.R.A.* They also denounced the NATO's assistance to France in her war against the Algerians, and approved the enlistment of African volunteers in the Algerian Army of National Liberation (*A.L.N.*). Moreover, they demanded from the participating countries to reconsider their relations with France⁽²³⁾.

The Third All-African Peoples Conference was held in Cairo from 23 to 31 March, 1961. The delegates saluted the Algerian

¹⁹ - For the resolutions see Legum, *ibid.*, pp. 236-247.

²⁰ - *Ibid.*, p. 46 [Footnotes]. See also pp. 149-159 for the full texts of the resolutions.

²¹ - Decraene, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.

²² - Legum, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-180.

²³ - *Ibid.*, pp. 187-192.

freedom fighters and passed a resolution on Algeria. It contained their unanimous support to the *G.P.R.A.*, and their recommendation to increase African political, diplomatic and material support to the Algerian people until the independence of the whole Algerian national territory, including the Sahara⁽²⁴⁾.

Another meeting of African states to agree to the Protocol of the African Charter took place in Cairo from 30 April to 5 May 1961. The Protocol was signed by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the participating countries, among whom was Muhammad Yazid of the *G.P.R.A.* The ministers seized this occasion to renew their affirmation of unconditional support to the struggling Algerian people, and expressed their agreement with the policy of the *G.P.R.A.*⁽²⁵⁾.

The 'Algerian Question' was again discussed during the Monrovia conference, which was held from 8 to 12 May 1961. The delegates appealed to the French government and the *G.P.R.A.* to conclude an agreement at the earliest moment to end the war and accord the Algerians their independence and territorial integrity⁽²⁶⁾.

All these Pan-African conferences show the development of solidarity between the sub-Saharan Africans and the Algerians, and the latter's steadily increasing involvement in Pan-African activities, especially after the Second World War.

²⁴ - For full texts, *ibid.*, pp. 247-262.

²⁵ - *Ibid.*, pp. 193-197.

²⁶ - *Ibid.*, pp. 198-201.

Conclusion:

The Pan-African movement influenced first English-speaking West Africans for a number of reasons such as, to cite but a few, the common language and, therefore, a shared Anglo-Saxon culture; the departure of a great number of African students from British West Africa for the United States by the 1920s to further their studies and, thereby, their exposure to Pan-African credos. J. D. Fage wrote: "...what had begun essentially as a movement of New World Blacks had become in effect the training school for the future leaders of the independence movements in anglophone Africa, and West Africa in particular."²⁷

However, French-speaking Africans were soon to take an interest in the Pan-African ideology, especially from the 1950s onwards, when they had attended all the aforesaid Pan-African gatherings. Likewise, Algeria was well aware of her African identity and followed closely the development of Pan-Africanism on the African continent. The Pan-African meetings that had been held since the 1950s marked the birth of a great movement of solidarity between sub-Saharan Africans and North Africans. Algeria benefited the most from this solidarity because of the hard conditions she was living, under the yoke of French colonisation, and which brought about the sympathy of most black Africans who had experienced – or still experienced – quite similar situations. The importance allotted to the Algerian issue in each Pan-African meeting, and the open support given to Algeria's struggle against the forces of colonisation was an aspect of the great change that Pan-Africanism underwent once on the African soil. Despite its name, the movement remained at the outset largely a 'Pan-Negro' or 'Pan-Black' issue. However, after the fifth Pan-African Congress (Manchester, 1945), Pan-Africanism became more African-oriented, and Africans from the four corners of the continent were invited to take part in its activities.

The colonial conditions made it difficult for the Algerian nationalists to attend all the Pan-African conferences which had been held since the late 1950s. Nonetheless, the Algerian issue was granted a great importance at each conference. This was chiefly due to the solidarity that all Africans expressed towards the Algerians, who were considered as unequivocally African brothers. On the other hand, Algeria's leaders saved neither time nor effort to build a position among the African community, for they were

²⁷ - Fage, *A History of Africa*, Routledge London and New York, 3rd edition, 1995, p.475.

conscious of their African identity and the common fate that bound them to their African brothers.

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