

The West African Students' Union:
An African Pressure Group in Britain (1920s-1950s)
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المخلص:

ازداد عدد الطلبة الأفارقة في الجامعات الأوروبية بشكل ملحوظ مع أواخر القرن التاسع عشر. كانت بريطانيا على وجه الخصوص وجهة الكثير من الطلبة من مستعمراتها بغرب أفريقيا: غامبيا، سيراليون، ساحل الذهب (غانا حالياً) ونيجيريا. كانت معظم منظمات الطلبة الأفارقة في بريطانيا في البداية مقتصرة على بعض النوادي التي شكلت للتخفيف من حنين الطلبة إلى الوطن، تبادل المعلومات والأخبار حول الوطن الأم، وحل المشاكل اليومية للطلبة المتعلقة بحياتهم في بلد أجنبي. لهذا السبب كانت حياة معظم تلك النوادي قصيرة لأنها كانت نشطة خلال مدة تواجد قادتها ببريطانيا فقط. رغم ذلك فإن منظمات طلابية أخرى اجتازت امتحان الزمن وتواجدت على الساحة لعشرات السنين. زيادة على ذلك، فإن نشاطات تلك المنظمات تجاوزت المطالب الطلابية وخاضت في القضايا السياسية، الاقتصادية، والثقافية الخاصة بالقارة السمراء.

يمثل 'إتحاد طلبة غرب أفريقيا' نموذجاً عن تلك المنظمات. أسس هذا الإتحاد بلندن في 7 أوت 1925، من طرف مجموعة مكونة من واحد وعشرين طالباً من غرب أفريقيا، بقيادة طالب بقسم الحقوق من أصل نيجيري يدعى لاديبو صولاتكي (Ladipo Solanke) وطبيب سيراليوني يدعى هاربرت بانكول-برايت (Herbert Bankole-Bright). ما ميز هذا الإتحاد هو أنه لم يكن في الواقع منظمة غرب أفريقية ولا طلابية رغم التسمية لأنه لم يكن يضم طلبة من غرب أفريقيا فحسب بل كانت عضويته مفتوحة لكل الطلبة الأفارقة، كما أن بعض أعضائه لم يكونوا طلبة.

الهدف من خلال هذا المقال هو تتبع بعض أهم النشاطات التي قام بها 'إتحاد طلبة غرب أفريقيا' والدور الذي لعبه على الساحة السياسية في كل من بريطانيا وأفريقيا. إضافة إلى ذلك، أخذ هذا الإتحاد كمثال على أهمية العمل التطوعي في إطار منظم والمكانة التي قد تحظى بها أية منظمة أو جمعية كشريك في عملية صنع القرار.

Abstract:

By the late 19th century, the number of African students in European universities grew considerably. Britain in particular was the destination of many students from her West African colonies: the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and Nigeria. In the beginning, most African student organizations in Britain came down to some clubs that were set up to ease the students' homesickness, exchange information and news about the mother country, and solve problems

relating to life in a foreign country. Therefore, most of those clubs were short-lived, since they remained active as long as their leaders lived in Britain. Nevertheless, other student bodies stood the test of time and lasted for decades. Besides, their activities transcended student aspirations to encompass political, economic and cultural matters related to Africa.

The West African Students' Union (WASU) is an example of such organizations. It was founded in London on 7 August, 1925 by a group of twenty-one West African students, under the leadership of a Nigerian law student named Ladipo Solanke and a Sierra Leonean doctor called Herbert Bankole-Bright. What characterized the WASU was that it was neither a West African nor a student organization. Its membership was not restricted to West Africans only but was rather open to all African students. Moreover, some of its members were not students.

The aim of this paper is to trace some of the most outstanding activities of the WASU from the 1920s to the 1950s, and the impact of this body on political matters in Britain and Africa. In addition, the WASU is taken as an example that illustrates the importance of voluntary work within an organized body, and the position an organization or association may enjoy as a partner in the policy-making process.

Introduction:

By the closing years of the 19th century, Britain became the destination of a growing number of African students, particularly from her four West African colonies, namely, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, and Nigeria. African families who could bear the expenses of their children's sojourn in the mother country, sent them to further their studies at the universities of the largest British cities, especially London. In the beginning, the African students tried to organize into clubs, associations, or unions which were for the most

short-lived. The latter remained operational as long as their leaders resided in Britain.⁽¹⁾ Such bodies were most of the time meant to "...ease loneliness, share news from home, and provide mutual self-help in dealing with the immediate practical problems of living in a strange new environment."⁽²⁾

The number of African students in Britain grew even more after the Great War. Most of them headed for the mother country with a kind of pride in being part of the British Empire, about which they had an idealized image. Their admiration was built upon Britain's reputation for justice and fair play.⁽³⁾ However, their disappointment was not long in coming, as they soon experienced discrimination in their daily life. They discovered that race relations in the imperial capital were lamentable, since, here again, they were regarded as belonging to a backward and savage race. The colour prejudice was a reality that they had to endure and cope with. Quoting a Gold Coast philosophy student in London, Esedebe wrote describing this situation:

"Amusing questions were frequently put to him [the African] as to whether he wore clothes before his voyage to England, whether it was safe for Europeans to visit his country since the climate was unsuitable for civilized people, and whether wild animals roamed about in his village."⁽⁴⁾

This atmosphere urged the African students to form an organization to look after the improvement of their social conditions throughout Britain by providing room and board, and to offer a

¹-For an account of the African and West Indian student organizations which emerged in Britain before the 1920s, see Imanuel Geiss, The Pan-African Movement, translated by Ann Keep, London, Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1974, pp. 293-297.

²-Donald K. Emmerson, African Student Organizations: The Politics of Discontent, Africa Report, May 1965, Vol. 10, No. 05, p. 6.

³-P. Olisanwuche Esedebe, Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776-1963, Washington D. C., Howard University Press, 1982, p. 95.

⁴-Ibid.

forum for political discussion and action. This organization was the West African Students' Union (WASU), which had been one of the most important African organizations in Britain for decades.

The aim of this article is to outline some of the activities of the WASU between the 1920s and the 1950s, its contributions to the growth of nationalism in West Africa in particular, and its role as a partner in the policy-making process. Besides, this paper is an attempt to show the importance and the necessity of voluntary work within a body in order to change the course of events.

Foundation and Aims of the WASU:

A number of factors were behind the emergence of the WASU. West African students were increasingly discontent with racial relations in Britain, and felt it then necessary to fight the colour prejudice. Moreover, they responded to a growing political awareness in the British West African dependencies and the rise of a West African nationalism. Actually, the foundation of the WASU was greatly due to the visit to Britain of the Sierra Leonean Dr. Herbert Bankole-Bright, a brilliant West African nationalist and a leading member of the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA).⁽¹⁾ He urged the students to unite in a West African body as the West Africans had done through the NCBWA.

In 1922, a Nigerian Yoruba student called Ladipo Solanke went to England to study law. He was the

¹-Hakim Adi, Pan-Africanism and West African Nationalism in Britain, African Studies Review, April 2000, Vol. 43, No. 01, pp. 74-75. The NCBWA is a political organization which was founded in 1920 and embraced the four British West African colonies. It called, among other things, for West African unity to face colonial abuses and retrieve the West Africans' rights.

architect behind the foundation of the WASU. He was born in Abeokuta (south-west of Nigeria) in 1884 and remained in London until his death in 1958. He believed in unity as an elementary condition for any kind of progress.⁽¹⁾ In his *The Story of Nigeria*, Michael Crowder described him as "... an ardent critic of the conduct of administrators in Nigeria, a champion of the glory of the Negro past, a constant writer of letters to the press on subjects concerning West Africa."⁽²⁾ Together with a number of West African law students, Solanke founded the WASU in London on 7 August 1925, with the following aims:

- 1- To provide and maintain a hostel for students of African descent.
- 2- To act as a Bureau of Information on African history, customs and institutions.
- 3- To act as a Centre for Research on all subjects appertaining to Africa and its development.
- 4- To promote self-help, unity, cooperation and the spirit of true leadership among its members.
- 5- To promote, through regular contacts, the spirit of goodwill, better understanding and brotherhood between all persons of African descent and other races of mankind.
- 6- To present to the world a true picture of African life and philosophy, thereby making a definitely African contribution towards the progress of civilisation.

¹-I. Geiss, op. cit., p. 298.

²-Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria*, London, Faber and Faber, 1973, p. 266.

- 7- To foster a spirit of national consciousness and racial pride among all African peoples.**
- 8- To publish a monthly magazine called WASU.**
- 9- To raise necessary funds for the carrying out of the above mentioned objects.⁽¹⁾**

An examination of the above aims shows that the WASU was meant to be more than just a student organization. Indeed, its aims transcended student aspirations, because its founders wanted it to become a major training ground for future West African political leaders.⁽²⁾ In fact, the Union's members pledged themselves to serve the cause of African people in Africa and elsewhere, and showed a great concern for the future of the black race in general. They were described as "...the flower of African intelligence. It was their duty to continue the work of correcting wrong impressions about men of African extraction...."⁽³⁾ Actually, the WASU was not an exclusively West African body. Its membership was extended throughout the years, for after 1928 it was open to all African students and those of African descent.⁽⁴⁾

Such a membership was likely to build a strong basis for the WASU and pave the way for the future generations, who succeeded to carry out the mission of the Union for decades. "During the next thirty years," Hakim Adi wrote, "although other West African organizations were formed, the WASU would become the main African organization in Britain, a training ground for future political leaders and an important anticolonial force in its own right."⁽⁵⁾ This is a historian's account, which confirms the important role played by the

¹-Vincent Bakpetu Thompson, Africa and Unity: The Evolution of Pan-Africanism, Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1969, p. 30.

²-D. K. Emmerson, op. cit., p. 6.

³-P. O. Esedebe, op. cit., p. 99.

⁴-I. Geiss, op. cit., p. 298. For instance, the Kenyan nationalist leader Jomo Kenyatta (1891-1978) and the West Indian H. Berekford Wooding were members of the WASU; in 1935 the African-American bass singer and actor Paul Robeson (1899-1976) became the Union's patron. See Esedebe, op. cit., p. 98.

⁵-H. Adi, op. cit., p. 75.

WASU in the defence of the black race and the betterment of its conditions.

The WASU's Social and Political Activities:

The first aim of the WASU to take shape was the launching of its organ, *WASU*, in March 1926. The editorship was held by a Sierra Leonean student called Melville Marke. The sub-editors were J. W. de Graft-Johnson, a Gold Coast student at London University, and Julius Ojo-Cole, a Nigerian undergraduate at King's College in London.⁽¹⁾ Due to financial difficulties, the *WASU* was issued as a quarterly rather than as a monthly as it was stated in the Union's aims. Nevertheless, it enjoyed a wide circulation outside the geographical boundaries of the United Kingdom. In fact, it was read in Africa, Europe, the New World, and even Asia.⁽²⁾ It provided a forum for many members of the WASU, who published articles tackling different issues: literary, cultural, political, etc. Although some historians (like, for instance, James S. Coleman) claimed that the issues published in the *WASU* in the 1920s were of 'unusually high quality,'⁽³⁾ others stated that "The contributions... were usually tinged with hyperbole, and the emotional tone sometimes made for trashiness."⁽⁴⁾ Despite this, this organ represented a reliable source of information about the activities of the Union. It published detailed comments on lectures and conferences organized by the WASU, especially during the Second World War. It was also an instrument for the propagation of nationalist and anti-colonial ideas among West Africans in particular, and continental Africans in general.

On the social level, and as it was declared in its aims, the WASU planned to set up a students' hostel. The first hostel acquired by the Union in 1928 was a gift by the great Jamaican Pan-Africanist leader Marcus Garvey (1885-1940), who got in touch with members of the WASU during his visit to England.⁽⁵⁾ The hostel was a meeting place for students from Africa, the West Indies, and North America. It

¹-Esedebe, op. cit., p. 97.

²-Ibid., pp. 97-98.

³- James S. Coleman, Nigeria: Background to Nationalism, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1958, p. 204.

⁴-Geiss, op. cit., p. 302.

⁵-Coleman, op. cit., p. 458.

offered a space for exchanging ideas and discussing matters related to the conditions of black people all over the world, and was a centre of intellectual and political activity. In addition to students, the hostel received guests of African blood in transit or in search for permanent accommodation. "Thus the WASU hostel," Geiss wrote, "expressly served both as a kind of port of call for Africans, who despite the basically liberal attitudes prevalent in Britain frequently had difficulty in finding lodgings, and also as a means of overcoming racial prejudice."⁽¹⁾

After the expiration of the one-year lease, the WASU decided to send Ladipo Solanke to West Africa to publicize the Union and raise money to secure another hostel. The latter had had a positive effect on the growth of the Union's activities and the increase of its membership. Consequently, Solanke toured several West African cities and towns from October, 1929 to September, 1932. He eventually succeeded in collecting enough funds for the hostel scheme which was opened on 1 January, 1933 at 62 Camden Road, in the borough of St. Pancras in London. Another result of Solanke's long sojourn in West Africa was the foundation of about forty WASU branches in the British West African colonies.⁽²⁾ This contributed to the spreading of political ideas and the growth of nationalist consciousness throughout West Africa. As Adi put it: "It was these branches that helped to create the conditions for the emergence of the future nationalist organizations in West Africa, especially the Gold Coast Youth Conference and Nigerian Youth Movement."⁽³⁾

With regard to the political activities of the WASU, it would be a quite difficult task to fully cover them within a work of this scope and size. Throughout the years after its foundation, the Union made contacts with a great number of black, anti-colonial, labour, and even communist organizations from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the New World. This gave the WASU an international weight and fostered its position as an African pressure group in the colonial country.

¹-Geiss, op. cit., p. 301.

²-Ibid., p. 300. Esedebe stated that Solanke's tour yielded about £1,381. Esedebe, op. cit., p. 104.

³-Adi, op. cit., p. 82. [footnote 20]

During the 1930s, the WASU became increasingly militant, and its criticism of the British colonial policies in West Africa grew more explicit. The WASU's leaders claimed that the British colonial system of indirect rule tended to sustain the position of the African traditional rulers whose interests coincided with those of the British colonial authorities,⁽¹⁾ at the detriment of the West Africans' aspirations. Furthermore, the WASU became soon an instrument of African nationalism, especially after the invasion of Ethiopia by the Italian forces in 1935. This aggression stirred Africans in their continent and all over the world, and widened the gap between them and their European rulers. The WASU, like many other black organizations in Britain and elsewhere, condemned the Italian act and joined the large movement of protest that followed the invasion to urge the British government to restrain Italy. Moreover, the Union increasingly demanded self-government in West Africa as a crucial step to achieve unity.⁽²⁾

In August 1941, a joint declaration by the American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945) and the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965) contributed to the growth of African nationalist activities. The Atlantic Charter (as this declaration was proclaimed) stated, among other things, that all peoples had the right to choose their own form of government. However, the Africans were deeply disappointed by Churchill's statement that this principle applied only to European nations which were under Nazism. Once again, the WASU condemned the Churchillian attitude, and joined other organizations to protest against it. In addition, throughout the 1940s, it supported and sponsored the visits of many West African delegates who protested against the colonial authorities and presented the West African peoples' grievances to the Colonial Office. For example, in August 1943, the WASU sponsored the visit of a West African Press Delegation led by the outstanding nationalist figure and the future first President of Nigeria, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996). The aim of the Delegation was to submit a memorandum to the Colonial Secretary in which they

¹-Emmerson, op. cit., p. 6.

²-For more details about this point see, for instance, Thompson, op. cit., pp. 51-53.

protested against "... West Africa's exclusion from the declarations in the Atlantic Charter."⁽¹⁾

During the Second World War, the WASU organized a Parliamentary Committee which acted as an African lobby and a partner in the colonial policy-making process. This committee met twice a month with members of the British Parliament (especially Labour MPs), and advised them on African matters. Thompson wrote that "... the Committee became the channel for bringing African grievances before Parliament during question time and during adjournment debates."⁽²⁾ Moreover, the WASU endorsed the West African nationalist demands, and urged the British government to grant the West African colonies and Protectorates internal self-government. Actually, the role of the WASU as an African pressure group during World War II was so significant that the British government recognized it as a mouthpiece of African nationalism.⁽³⁾

During the 1950s, the Union continued its commitment to the African cause, and supported the activities of the young African nationalist leaders to free their countries from the colonial yoke. Most of those leaders had been studying in Britain, and some of them – like the future first Ghanaian and Kenyan Presidents, Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972) and Jomo Kenyatta respectively, to cite but these two – had been among the WASU's most active members in Britain.

Conclusion:

The foundation of the WASU was the fruit of the efforts of a small group of West Africans who were studying in the colonial country, and who were well-aware that their calls were most likely to have an echo through an organized body. They reacted against the Blacks' conditions in Britain and the Whites' colour prejudice. They also responded to the emergence of a West African nationalism which started to take shape after the First World War, when the Africans in general realized that the colonial authorities were not really

¹-Ibid., p. 53. For more details about the visit of the West African Press Delegation and the contents of the memorandum, see George Padmore, Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa, London, Dennis Dobson, 1956, pp. 152-154.

²-Ibid.

³-Geiss, op. cit., p. 304.

determined to make any political concessions to improve the conditions of the colonized people.

Despite its status as a student union, the WASU became an important African political organization in the colonial capital. It was not strong in terms of membership,⁽¹⁾ but it succeeded throughout the years to impose itself as a West African lobby, which endorsed the cause of the black race. Moreover, the WASU forged the political character of many young Africans, who played a decisive role in the nationalist movements of their countries after the Second World War, and who held important political positions after the independence.

¹-It seems that the exact number of the Union's members is not available. However, Geiss and Emmerson tried to give some figures which show that the WASU was not numerically strong. See Geiss, *ibid.*, p. 299, and Emmerson, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

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