

4-1-1991

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### Recommended Citation

Dorsey, Francis E. (1991) "Garveyism: A '90s Perspective," *New Directions*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 7.  
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol18/iss2/7>

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# GARVEYISM

## A '90s Perspective

26 By Francis E. Dorsey

**B**orn on August 17, 1887 in Jamaica, Marcus Mosiah Garvey is universally recognized as the father of Pan African Nationalism. After observing first-hand the inhumane suffering of his fellow Jamaicans at home and abroad, he embarked on a mission of racial redemption. One of his greatest assets was his ability to transcend myopic nationalism. His "Back to Africa" vision and his "Africa for the Africans at home and abroad" geo-political perspectives, although well before their time, are all accepted and implemented today. In fact, they were the catalysts for the "Black is Beautiful" and "Black Power" calls and programs of the 1960s in the United States. Moreover, emphasis on unity and organization by groups today draw directly from the Garvey Movement of the 1920s. Garvey was not an integrationist. He taught his followers to be proud that they were Black, to cherish their African past, and to build for themselves their own civilization of the future.<sup>1</sup>

### Garveyism

Garveyism, within the Afrocentric context, views the liberation struggle in terms of African nationalism versus European nationalism. Garveyism is based on the salient fact that African peoples have been oppressed, exploited, and dehumanized to a greater degree than any other race or class of people in the history of mankind and that our Africanity is deeply rooted in our common suffering and racial heritage. Garveyism seeks the total liberation of Africans and all African peoples; unity, stability, a Pan African nationalist mental commonality; a sense of self, community; African nationhood, self-determination, self-reliance and a common destiny; the creation of Pan African nationalist solidarity and confraternity among all African



peoples; political, economic and psycho-cultural sovereignty for all African peoples; and cooperatism.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Garvey's "Back to Africa" vision had significance for African Americans in "that once Africa had been freed from colonial rule, Blacks in the United States could be given aid in their fight for equal rights". Garveyism linked the domestic struggle of African Americans to the international struggle of all African peoples. At that juncture, the liberation struggle reached its diasporan zenith. This is one of the greatest contributions of Garveyism to the Pan African Nationalist struggle.

Garveyism represents the highest stage in the development of 20th century Pan African nationalism. Despite the fact that the Garvey Movement and Garvey himself were attacked by both Blacks and whites, yet their ability to internationalize the liberation struggle of African people remains immutable. Garveyism sowed the seeds of financial and economic independence/empowerment and the insistence that Blacks should support Black businesses.

Also, Garveyism was very instrumental in affecting the final resolution of the Fifth

Pan African Congress in Manchester, England in 1945 in which the delegates sought the right of all peoples to govern themselves and freedom from imperialist control whether political or economic. Garveyism has taught that political power without economic power is worthless.

### The UNIA

The corner-stone of Garvey's philosophical values was the establishment of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, UNIA, in 1914, not only for the promulgation of economic independence of African peoples but also as an institution and political base of operations. In other words, Garvey used the UNIA as a potent economic weapon in the struggle for freedom. Economic independence was, therefore, mounted as the major challenge to exploitation and racism. According to Alphonso Pinkey, the UNIA "became the first Black organization to embrace the complete spectrum of Black nationalism, and its leader was the first Black man to put forth a comprehensive ideology of Black nationalism."<sup>3</sup>

The UNIA gave African Americans alternatives to daily existence and resistance to exploitation and racism. African Americans then became involved in businesses, churches and social organizations as UNIA membership grew into the millions. These activities were extremely significant and essential for imbuing in African Americans a sense of racial pride and self-respect and confidence in their blackness/Africanity. At the same time, Garveyism sought "to restore to the Black man the manhood taken from him during centuries of slavery."<sup>4</sup> At a UNIA international conference in New York on August 1, 1920, delegates drafted a "Declaration for the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World" and demanded "certain basic (human) rights which would encourage the (African) race and serve to stimulate it to a higher

destiny."<sup>5</sup> Garveyism taught us that we are somebody; we are African people; our history is that of an African people; and that our future is that of an African people.

It was indeed this consciousness in Garvey's geo-political and philosophical perspectives that led him to promote the values of territoriality, culture, religion and economics as foundation elements in his conceptual framework of the UNIA.

### Territoriality

The concept of territory involves the acquisition of land. A people cannot be totally free without a home base. It is here where they can grow within their culture, a culture which gives them identity, purpose and direction.<sup>6</sup> If that land has offered freedom—political, economic, social, religious and cultural, then the land, the nation, in a sense, will be worshipped. But what happens when that land, that nation, has not historically allowed these "freedoms" to emerge naturally? The people then, by choice at least in the United States, according to the Constitution, have the political right to rebel.

For the African American, civil rights have at times taken precedence over basic human rights. It has been this conflict—the suppression of civil rights and the conflict between civil rights over basic human rights—which have, in part, created a foundation on which the land question has so often played a critical role in the lives of those African Americans who have not forgotten their history. A history not rooted in slavery, but another history of a free and independent Africa. It is this viewpoint which led Garvey to articulate:

"The [African American] needs a nation and a country of his own, where he can best show evidence of his own ability in the art of human progress."<sup>7</sup> He argued for land, and it was the responsibility of the UNIA "to work unceasingly for the bringing about of a National Homeland for the Negroes in Africa." Thus a major battle cry for the UNIA was "Africa for the African at Home and Abroad."<sup>8</sup>

### Culture

A people's culture cannot be external to itself in order for the culture to have validity. It must be derived from one's historical experience, one's historic memory, and *not* a contrived experience but an experience free from manipulation and control. Since culture helps to transmit value systems, if one practices or accepts those cultural re-

quirements external to one's specific cultural group, the possibility exists in accepting a wholesome value system. Because culture is a learned behavior, African Americans have often learned its duality. As has been argued: "Black people have been exposed to both a point of view that aims to co-opt Black people into Eurocentric culture, and a point of view that aims to exclude black people. . . ."<sup>9</sup>

The elitist, exclusionist viewpoint tends to find fault with the victim and not those

## Gaveyism represents the highest stage in the development of 20th century Pan African nationalism.

who have helped to perpetuate a negative or unrewarding environment. In other words, the dominant culture can have an everlasting effect upon how a people defines itself. Garvey understood this when he came to the U.S. His first task was to create racial pride among the Black masses worldwide. His pride or "Race-First" philosophy can generally be placed in three categories: 1) the issue of unity 2) the issue of race prejudice and 3) the issue of pride and heritage.<sup>10</sup>

Garvey's first call to the Black masses was unity. He felt that first racial "purity" was essential to the future unification of the race. And because of his views on "Purity of Race", some of his critics often labeled him a "racist." He states: ". . . I believe in a pure Black race just as how all self respecting whites believe in a pure white race. . . . I am conscious of the fact that slavery brought upon us the curse of many colors within the Negro race, but that is no reason why we of ourselves should perpetuate the evil. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

It was through Garvey's conception of "Race First" that he tried to manipulate Africans toward unity. Critical to Garvey's conception of race was the issue of race

prejudice. For Garvey this was a two-fold problem. First, he was often accused of creating division by developing and maintaining conflict between lighter and darker-skinned Africans. Nothing could be further from the truth. Garvey recognized that African people were victims of "color consciousness" as well as circumstances. As Garvey argues: "What about colour, it doesn't amount to anything. It is only an accident. Nature had a purpose. It is hoped that in the new civilization we will see no [African] thinking his skin better than the others."<sup>12</sup>

Garvey's other concern on race prejudice was directed at Caucasians and their prevailing attitudes toward African people. He felt that race prejudice prevailed not so much because of the color of the Africans' skin but toward their predicament under the rule and domination of the white man. As a result, Garvey believed that the problem would not be corrected by laws. He asserted that: ". . . Within modern times the [African] race has not had any real statesmen, and the masses of our people have always accepted the intentions and actions of the statesmen and leaders of other races as being directed in our interest as a group in conjunction with the interests of others. Such a feeling on our part caused us to believe that the Constitution of the United States was not written for [Africans], as well as the Constitutions of England, France, Italy, Germany and other countries where [Africans] happened to have their present domicile, either as citizens or as subjects. That we suffer so much today under whatsoever flag we live is proof positive that constitutions and laws, when framed by the early advocates of human liberty, never included and were never intended for us as a people. It is only a question of sheer accident that we happen to be fellow citizens today with the descendants of those who, through their advocacy, laid the foundation for human rights. So this brings us to the point where as a people, we can expect very little from the efforts of the present day statesmen of other races, in that their plans, (as far as advantages to be derived therefrom are concerned) are laid only in the interests of their own people and not in the interest of the [Africans]. . . ."<sup>13</sup>

Since constitutions have not been favorably designed to meet the demands of African people, Garvey understood that "love" and/or human rights could not be legislated because:

... You can never curb the prejudice of the one race or nation against the other by law. It must be regulated by one's own feeling, one's own will, and if one's feeling and will rebel against you no law in the world can curb it. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, Garvey felt that prejudice would always continue between Black and white "so long as the latter believe that the former is intruding upon their rights."<sup>15</sup>

Coupled with and not separate from Garvey's concept of race first was pride and heritage in the African race. One of his major concerns was to bridge the gap between native Africans and diasporan Africans so that:

... Everybody knows that there is absolutely no difference between the native African and the American and West Indian Negroes, in that we are descendants from one common family stock. It is only a matter of accident that we have been divided and kept apart for over three hundred years. . . .<sup>16</sup>

But what does this pride and heritage offer? What is the plan of action? How can this be done? Garvey answers:

... We are organized by the absolute purpose of bettering our condition, industrially, commercially, socially, religiously and politically. We are organized not to hate other men, but to lift ourselves, and to demand respect of all humanity. . . .<sup>17</sup>

This concept of racial pride and common ancestral homeland (Mother Africa) dominates the Afrocentric perspective of Garvey's philosophy.

## Religion

Christianity is at the soul of the symbolic interpretation and manipulation of Black Americans. The so-called biblical prophecy has been utilized to undermine the African's acceptance of his own religious beliefs, as well as the Caucasian's interpretation of Christianity and how it had been manipulated to justify the enslavement of Africans. Even after emancipation, the manipulation of religious texts and symbols prevailed.

According to Prof. Tony Martin, Garvey did not manipulate religion for its own sake but developed it from a Black man's perspective to further his program of *Race First* from a political conception.<sup>18</sup> Garvey understood Christianity, having been raised in the Methodist Church as a youth but later converting to Catholicism. Regardless of

one's beliefs, religion was viewed by Garvey as having been misinterpreted by Europeans. He argues:

... We profess to live in the atmosphere of Christianity, yet our acts are as barbarous as if we never knew Christ. He taught us to love, yet we hate; to forgive, yet we revenge; to be merciful, yet we condemn and punish and still we are Christians. . . .<sup>19</sup>

As an individual's culture must be determined through his own experiences, so,

There are many racist overtones in modern religion that have their historical roots when Christianity first came into contact with the African race.

too, must his conception of God. On the image of God, Garvey takes the following position.

... If the white man has the idea of a white God, let him worship his God as he desires. . . . We as Negroes have found a new ideal, whilst our God has no color, yet it is human to see everything through one's own spectacles, and since the white people have seen their God through white spectacles, we have only now started out. . . . to see our God through our own spectacles. . . . We believe in the God of Ethiopia. . . . that is the God in whom we believe, but shall worship him through the spectacles of Ethiopia. . . .<sup>20</sup>

There are many racist overtones in modern religion that have their historical roots when Christianity first came into contact with the African race. The symbolic manipulation of the "color" of Christ has its origins in the Middle Ages as depicted through the eyes of European artists.<sup>21</sup> These Western artists deliberately whitened or bleached Christ's hair, eyes and skin complexion. Not only was this done to Christ but also to the famous Black Madonnas extant in European churches today.

This "whitening" process and the creating of "colored" saints not only has been used to distort reality but also, more tragic for the African, the color black was deliberately used as subordinate to white.

It is from this brief historical conception of the manipulation of the "symbolic" color of Christ that African people have been plagued with similar alterations, specifically, in the Bible. Words (language) and paintings (art) have historically been manipulated to deceive the Black man. Few people are aware of this history. But what about those historians and religious scholars who know the truth? To suppress this knowledge from the masses only intensifies and strains race relations. It is from this philosophical belief that Garvey sought to eliminate the religious influence and the manipulation of the symbols for the purpose of white domination.

## Economics

No organization can exist for very long without a sound economic foundation. The ultimate goal at all times is for economic self-determination and economic empowerment. Therefore, this quest for equality, self-determination and advancement in the marketplace is crucial for economic growth within both the Black residential and business community. Economic growth in turn provide jobs internal to the community and produces "tax payers" as opposed to tax burdens. Unlike the contemporary concept of "Black capitalism", economic nationalism under the Garvey model does not become dependent upon government "handouts" and/or corporate support. The primary aim of economic empowerment, therefore, is not for the exploitation of the Black community but to provide resources and skills, and help curb economic discrimination.<sup>22</sup> Failure to do this often results in a poverty-stricken community. Garvey's position on poverty is:

... A hellish state to be in. It is no virtue. It is a crime. To be poor, is to be hungry without possible hope of food; to be sick without hope of medicine; to be tired and sleepy without a place to lay one's head; to be naked without the hope of clothing; to be despised and comfortless. To be poor is to be a fit subject for crime and hell. The hungry man steals bread and thereby breaks the eight commandment; by his state he breaks all the laws of God and man and becomes an outcast. In thought and deed he covets his neighbor's goods;

comfortless is he as he seeks his neighbor's wife; to him there is no other course but sin and death. That is the way of poverty. No one wants to be poor.<sup>23</sup>

To combat poverty, Garvey embraces capitalism but with the following stipulations:

... Capitalism is necessary to the progress of the world, and those who unreasonably and wantonly oppose or fight against it are enemies to human advancement; but there should be a limit to the individual or corporate use or control of it. No individual should be allowed the possession, use or the privilege to invest on his own account, more than a million, and no corporation should be allowed to control more than five millions. Beyond this, all control, use and investment of money, should be the prerogative of the State with the concurrent authority of the people. With such a method we would prevent the ill-will, hatred and conflicts that now exist between races, peoples and nations. Modern wars are generally the outgrowth of dissatisfied capitalistic interests either among foreign or strange peoples or nations...<sup>24</sup>

It was Garvey's purpose to eliminate the economic chaos within the Black community. To do this he established a host of business enterprise which included The Black Star Line—a steamship company, The Black Cross Navigation and Trading Company, factories, restaurants and hotels.<sup>25</sup>

Garvey's attempt to ameliorate the economic problems of the Black community were short lived. Two reasons led to the demise of his economic endeavors: 1) he lacked a competent business and managerial staff, and 2) he had many dishonest associates in his confidence who hurried the demise of the UNIA's business endeavors.

Too often when African Americans rally behind a call for nationalism, the establishment becomes fearful and almost always foresees violence as the final alternative. But historically, Africans in America have always heeded the call for American nationalism to protect democracy, the full benefits of which, so often, they had not received. Their response has been seen effectively in previous wars, but somehow what they fought for has not always been reciprocated. As a result, they have established their own form of nationalism to fulfill the American dream.

Like their white counterparts, African Americans want to have the ability to be free politically, economically, socially, religiously and culturally. When the opportunity to full access for growth and development is denied, African Americans often withdraw to combat the "racist" actions with which they have been confronted. Such was the ideological nationalism embodied in the philosophical values of the UNIA that Marcus Garvey utilized to extricate African people.

The ideology of Garvey's nationalism has psychologically enabled African people to solidify their nationalist ranks...

### Conclusion

By delineating how Marcus Garvey utilized African philosophical values in developing the message of his ideology, this article brought to the fore the vital significance of the ideology of self-help, self-empowerment, self-pride and the originality and reality of Mother Africa as a geo-political motivating force in the development of Pan African Nationalism as we approach the 21st century.

In terms of the Afrocentric geo-political fallout effect of the philosophy of Garveyism, African people and people of African descent throughout the diaspora can now view and accept themselves as members of the same African extended family. In this way, African people are able to ossify their nationalist ranks to create their own Common Pan African Nationalist Home/Fortress Africa 2000 so as to balance the contemporary geo-political reality of European Nationalism/"Europe 1992"/"Fortress Europe 1992."

The ideology of Garvey's nationalism has also psychologically enabled African people to solidify their nationalist ranks so that

they would cross the time line into the 21st century a united, solidified, powerful, global majority people. From an Afrocentric perspective, this is the single most significant contribution of Garvey's philosophy to the liberator struggle of African people. □

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Theodore G. Vincent. *Black Power and the Garvey Movement*. (California: Ramparts Press, 1972), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>Linus A. Hoskins. *The Political Economy of Pan African Nationalism: Historical Origins and Contemporary Forms*. (Baltimore, Maryland: Pyramid Press, 1987), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Alphonso Pinkney. *Red, Black and Green: Black Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976) pp. 46-53.

<sup>4</sup>Vincent, *op. cit.*, p. 19

<sup>5</sup>Chuba Okadigbo. "Marcus Garvey: Father of African Nationalism". *Class*. (February 1987), p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>Maulana Ron Karenga. *Kwaidia Theory: An Introductory Outline*. (California: Kwaidia Publications, 1980), p. 103.

<sup>7</sup>Amy Jacques-Garvey, (ed.), *Philosophy & Opinions of Marcus Garvey Vol. I* (New York: Athenevin, 1971), p. 23.

<sup>8</sup>Amy Jacques-Garvey, (ed.), *Philosophy & Opinions of Marcus Garvey Vol. II* (New York: Athenevin, 1971), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Carlton W. and Barbara J. Molette, *Black Theatre: Premise and Presentation* (Bristol, Indiana: Wyndham Hall Press, 1986), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup>Pinkney, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>11</sup>Amy Jacques-Garvey, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup>Amy Jacques-Garvey and E.U. Essien-Udom, *More Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, Vol. 3 (Totowa, New Jersey: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1977), p. 39.

<sup>13</sup>Amy Jacques-Garvey, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>18</sup>Tony Martin. *Race First: The Ideological and Organizations Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), p. 69.

<sup>19</sup>Amy Jacques-Garvey, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup>Barry N. Schwartz and Robert Disch, *White Racism: Its History, Pathology and Practice* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970) pp. 273-285.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas L. Blair, *Retreat to the Ghetto: The End of a Dream* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 163-181.

<sup>23</sup>Amy Jacques-Garvey, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup>Amy Jacques-Garvey, Vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>25</sup>Pinkney, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.