

Marcus Garvey: A Controversial Figure in the History of Pan-Africanism

by

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Abstract

Pan-Africanism is a political doctrine, as well as a movement, with the aim of unifying and uplifting African nations and the African Diaspora as a universal African community. In that sense, Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founder of the Black Star Line and pioneer of the back-to-Africa movement can certainly be considered a Pan-Africanist. But is not the concept of Pan-Africanism supposed to include the notion of African pride too? I believe so. Nevertheless, when we take a closer look at Garvey's life and ideologies, the notion of African pride is barely perceptible at times. Indeed, we sometimes get the impression that he tended to put Western culture/ civilization on a pedestal. For example, it would appear that he tended to idolize Western leaders such as Napoleon and Hitler – though they were extremely racist. It also seems that he tended to prefer Christianity over African religions, Western music such as classical music over African music, and Western uniforms rather than African clothing, and so on. All these points, which seem to be the fruits of intellectual colonization, make Garvey a controversial figure in the history of Pan-Africanism. Besides trying to analyze objectively the complex personality of Garvey, this paper is aimed at questioning the notion of Pan-Africanism and raising the issue of intellectual colonization.

Keywords

African cultural heritage; African Diaspora; African Empire; African pride; back-to-Africa movement; Black Star Line; Christianity; clothing; culture; education; intellectual colonization; Jamaican Patois; literary English; Marcus Garvey; music; Pan-Africanism; races; Rastafari; UNIA.

Introduction

Doing doctoral research on the history of Jamaican popular music in the twentieth century, I study the life of singers, producers and other protagonists of that story. Thus, I recently took an interest in the life and theories of Marcus Garvey who has been perceived as a true prophet by most Rastafarians since the beginning of the Rasta movement in the early 1930's. For a great many people, especially in the Caribbean, Garvey is often depicted as the father of Pan-Africanism, a political doctrine and movement designed to unify and uplift African nations and the African Diaspora as a universal African community.

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Thus, this paper examines Garvey's Pan-African accomplishments/projects, and explores the ambiguity of his character with an emphasis on some contradictions in his ideologies and lifestyle.

Garvey's Pan-African Accomplishments and Projects

As I said above, some of Garvey's actions can certainly be associated with Pan-Africanism, and in this context I will not entertain a full biography, because notable scholars such as Edmund David Cronon, Tony Martin, Rupert Lewis, Robert Hill and others have made an outstanding contribution already. Thus, my point will be to simply mention some of his most important struggles to empower Black people and forge a link between the African continent and the African Diaspora.

First of all, Marcus Garvey founded the UNIA in 1914 in his country, Jamaica. The main goal of this organization was to institute a separate-but-equal collegiate educational system for Black Jamaicans. He was influenced by the ideas of Booker T. Washington and planned to develop a school similar to his Tuskegee Institute founded in 1881 in Alabama. Indeed, Garvey was convinced that education was the means to liberate his people and to develop a Black consciousness so that Black people could reach political, economic and cultural independence.

In 1916, he went to the United States of America (USA) in the hope of sharing his views with Booker T. Washington. But, the latter unfortunately died just before he arrived. However, he embarked upon a long period of travel around the USA, giving speeches and lectures, before settling down in New York where he set up a branch of the UNIA in 1917. According to Edmund D. Cronon, it “contained 2,000 members within three weeks.”¹ And within a few years, Garvey became one of the best known Black leaders in the USA and perhaps in the entire world. In 1919, there were about thirty UNIA branches throughout the USA and over 2, 000, 000 members worldwide.² Through the UNIA, Garvey created, among other things, a printing house, factories, trading companies and schools with the single aim of improving the life of Black people. Among his numerous accomplishments, was his weekly newspaper, *The Negro World* which enabled him to inform readers about UNIA activities and thus convey a Pan-African message.

Actually, Garvey wanted to restore Black people’s dignity which slavery and colonization had tried to degrade. He wanted Black people to stop thinking they were inferior beings and that they could acquire knowledge, technical and financial means to free themselves from the yoke of White people. What is more, Garvey became more and more involved in the back-to-Africa movement and created an international shipping company called the Black Star Line. It was, in fact, a shipping line belonging to Black people and operating by and for them – stocks were sold at UNIA conventions –, whose long-term main goal was the repatriation of African-Americans, African-Jamaicans and other Black people of the Diaspora to their African homeland. Today, everyone agrees that Marcus Garvey’s Black Star Line stands as a strong symbol of Pan-Africanism.

To sum up, his main objectives were the repatriation of Black people of the African Diaspora to Africa and the creation “of a strong and powerful Negro nation in Africa”³. He saw himself as “Provisional President of Africa,”⁴ showing his strong belief in a personal destiny as the redeemer of Africa. It is important to note that, racially speaking, Garvey argued for segregation rather than integration. He advocated separation between Whites and Blacks and was clearly against intermixed couples. He believed in “race purity”⁵ and accordingly in the principle of Africa for the Africans. And in regards to religion, he was a Christian but believed in a Black version of Christianity.

At first sight, Marcus Garvey’s programme falls into the notions of Black pride and Pan-Africanism. Indeed, he was clearly against enslavement, colonization and any doctrine aiming at enslaving Black people. He advocated the freedom of Black people – those in Africa and those abroad – at political, economical and cultural levels, and was convinced that the liberation and empowerment of his people would happen through education. Following the examples of the USA, the United Kingdom (UK) and other European countries, Garvey promoted the establishment of a strong and powerful African empire for and governed by Africans, and put forward his person for the position of the eventual head of Africa. Furthermore, Garvey was not only a theoretician with great ideals but also an action man too, for he made every endeavor to turn his ideas into reality through concrete actions such as the UNIA, and the Black Star Line.

However, his amazing undertakings coupled with his segregationist ideologies led other contemporary Pan-Africanists like W.E.B. Dubois to come into conflict with him. Nevertheless, his contribution to Pan-Africanism was real as his struggles, accomplishments and projects mentioned earlier showed. Garvey has been all the more associated with Pan-Africanism since a wide variety of famous Pan-Africanists and Black nationalists claimed to take their inspiration from him such as Kwame Nkrumah – the first President of independent Ghana in 1957 –, Leopold Sedar Senghor – the first President of independent Senegal in 1960 and father of the Negritude –, Patrice Lumumba – the first Prime Minister of independent Congo in 1960 –, Julius Nyerere – the first President of independent Tanzania in 1962 –, Jomo Kenyatta – the first President of independent Kenya in 1964 –, Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X, the Nigerian singer Fela Anikulapo Kuti and the Jamaican reggae stars Burning Spear and Bob Marley to name just a few. It also must be stressed that the Rasta movement, which is nothing more than a mixture of Judeo-Christian beliefs, African-centeredness and African religion, has been clearly influenced by Marcus Garvey's ideologies. Moreover, according to Robert Hill, an authority on Marcus Garvey, "the Rastafarians have more than anyone kept alive his memory after [his death in] 1940."⁶

This last point is very interesting because it seems that surprisingly, Marcus Garvey despised Rastas according to several scholars such as professors Hill and Chevannes. According to the latter, "[h]is attitude toward [Rastas] bordered on scorn."⁷ "They attended the 1934 convention of the UNIA, but he disassociated himself from them and made his position known to the convention."⁸ Furthermore, Marcus Garvey was also very critical of the one they consider their God – whom they call Jah –, then Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I, though the latter was a key figure in Pan-Africanism. Seeing himself as eventual President of Africa, Garvey probably saw Haile Selassie as his rival. These two points could be seen as in contradiction to his Pan-African policies. In reality, when we take a closer look at Marcus Garvey's life, some contradictions are noticeable, especially regarding his attitudes towards the notions of race and religion as well as some other cultural elements.

Contradictions in Marcus Garvey's Ideologies and Lifestyle

The second part of this paper is aimed at stressing a certain number of contradictions in Marcus Garvey's ideologies and lifestyle.

The first inconsistency concerns his point of view on races. In September 1923, Marcus Garvey said in a speech delivered in New York, "[w]e who believe in race purity [...] [w]e believe that the White race should protect itself against racial contamination, and the Negro should do the same."⁹ In 1924, he added that "[t]he United Negro Improvement Association [...] believes in the purity of the Negro race and the purity of the white race"¹⁰ and advocated "Africa for the Africans"¹¹ based upon the same nationalistic concept of Europe for the Europeans.

Actually, Marcus Garvey responded to violence, racism and nationalism of the White society of the time with the same weapons, namely racism and xenophobia. But, such an attitude did not uplift the Pan-African movement; it completely undermined the credibility of it instead. Indeed, this could have had serious consequences such as the confusion between Pan-Africanism and doctrines like those of apartheid or Nazism.

Moreover, this is worth noting that “[i]n March 1934, in [his] magazine, *The Black Man*, [Garvey] recommended that his readers peruse *Mein Kampf*, expressing his hope that one day the Black race would produce its own Hitler.”¹² He wrote the following disturbing words, “Hitler has a lesson to teach and he is teaching it well.”¹³ In fact, Hitler was not the only European leader whom Marcus Garvey admired; he also paid tribute to Benito Mussolini, the fascist dictator of Italy, and Napoleon, the high priest of slavery and colonization. Last but not least, he even began a close association with the White racist group named the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), praising the Klan’s intention of making America a White man’s country. In July 1922, he publicly said:

*From impressions, from my observations, from my understanding, the Ku Klux Klan is a mighty white organization in the United States of America, organized for the purpose of upholding white supremacy in this country; organized for the purpose of making America a white man’s country, pure and simple. The organization has absolutely no apology to make as far as its program is concerned – a program of making America a white man’s country. [...] Whilst the Ku Klux Klan desires to make America absolutely a white man’s country, the Universal Negro Improvement Association wants to make Africa absolutely a Black man’s country.*¹⁴

It should be emphasized that the attitude of members of the KKK towards Black people confined itself to frequent rapes, murders and lynchings. Therefore, the alliance of Marcus Garvey with this racist group was more than controversial. It could be perceived on the one hand as totally insulting to Black people, and on the other hand as a real pact with the devil. Generally speaking, Marcus Garvey’s attitude towards the KKK as well as the European racist tyrants mentioned earlier was totally irresponsible and contradictory for an alleged Pan-Africanist. What is more, it could have contributed to legitimizing the enslavement and colonization which Marcus Garvey was supposed to fight against. Instead of praising the *benefits* of Hitler, Napoleon or the KKK, it would have been more moral and honourable for Marcus Garvey to focus on African leaders such as the Guinean Samory Toure – who fought against French colonizers in the 19th century in the actual Mali –, Jomo Kenyatta or even Haile Selassie I among others.

The second inconsistency in his life lies in his attitude towards Christianity. It is common knowledge that Marcus Garvey was a Christian, a Roman Catholic first and then a member of the African Orthodox Church to be precise. He showed great respect for the Bible – the King James Version – and often referred to the Holy Book in his speeches. Moreover, one of his favourite quotations was: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”¹⁵ The distinctive characteristic of his faith was that he believed in a Black God, the “God of Ethiopia” as he used to call him, and promoted an Afrocentric version of Christianity.

To support his beliefs, he used the few references to Ethiopia in the Bible as well as the following verse: “God created man in his image”¹⁶ – Marcus Garvey being a Black man, so was God according to him. He also obviously denounced the Eurocentric interpretations of the Bible which, moreover, had contributed to the oppression and enslavement of Africans.¹⁷

In reality, his Afrocentric version of Christianity was absolutely comprehensible for it constituted a legitimate response to Christianity which played a significant role in slavery and colonization. Nevertheless, although it was an Afrocentric version of Christianity, the fact remains that it was Christianity, namely the religion of the colonizer. This approach was in a way incoherent for a Pan-Africanist, especially a so-called uncompromising one like him. Indeed, as I said in the introduction, the concept of Pan-Africanism is supposed to be intrinsically linked with the notion of African pride. Consequently, it is essential that Pan-Africanists are proud of their African cultural heritage. So it would have been much more Pan-African for Marcus Garvey to return to the spirituality of his forefathers, namely religions such as Voodoo, Myal or even Rastafari, instead of embracing his torturers’ religion – Professor Rupert Lewis reported that “Garvey found many of [Rastas]’ doctrines embarrassing to his own Christian thought.”¹⁸ To conclude that paragraph on religion, here is a quotation from Jomo Kenyatta to ponder over:

When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the Land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible.¹⁹

The other main contradictions that we can notice in Garvey’s life regard some cultural/civilization elements such as education, language, music and clothing. As mentioned above, Garvey was convinced that education was the means to liberate his people. For that reason, he championed studies, instruction, and knowledge. To understand his attitude towards education, it is important to highlight that Marcus Garvey was a self-educated man contrary to other contemporary Pan Africanists like W.E.B. Dubois who received his Ph.D. from Harvard. He probably had to take a revenge on his own education. Whatever it was, Garvey spoke very highly of education.

But what is education if not a Western institution par excellence? Is there a contradiction between proclaiming Pan-Africanism and advocating education? It is possible? Yes, for the mere reason that, roughly speaking, education inevitably results in the building of a bourgeoisie, if not an elite, and hence a two-speed society with a sharp divide between the elite – the rich – and the rest of the population which remains largely at the bottom of the social ladder – the poor, the former generally exploiting the latter.

But this model of capitalistic society is clearly a Western one and the opposite of traditional African society. Indeed, as Julius Nyerere remarked:

Both the “rich” and the “poor” individual were completely secure in African society...the capitalist or the landed exploiter [was] unknown to traditional African society. [...] In our traditional African society we were individuals within a community. We took care of the community, and the community took care of us. We neither needed nor wished to exploit our fellow men.²⁰

The other danger that lies in seeing education as the only and best means to succeed in life is that it implicitly undermines the status of some activity sectors such as farming to bureaucracy, which can truly have a negative impact on societies, especially in Africa. Indeed, this way of thinking has been partially responsible for a labour shortage in West African fields – cassava fields, cocoa fields, rice fields etc. For decades, becoming a lawyer, a doctor or a businessman has been much more attractive, for young people from Cote d’Ivoire or Benin, than taking over their parents’ farm. It is regrettable because for a long time, farming had constituted an economic basis for development in many African countries.

As we have just read, Garvey put education and intellect in general on a pedestal. Not surprisingly, he was fond of words. He really enjoyed writing and reading, and in 1937, he told an audience in St. Kitts, British West Indies, “Read! Read! Read! And never stop until you discover the knowledge of the Universe”²¹. Also, he was a great orator, and undoubtedly the greatest Black orator of the twentieth century. Furthermore, he was a very skilled poet as well, many of the ideas he conveyed in his writings and speeches were present in his numerous poems. But, one point that must be noted regards his use of language, especially in his poetry. In the latter, we can easily come across such lines as “Can’st Thou not change this bloody thing”²² and “What Is In Thy Bosom?”²³, “Can’st Thou” and “Thy” being typical forms of Shakespearian times, but it is extremely rare to read words in Jamaican Creole, also known locally as Patois or simply Jamaican, which is roughly a mixture of English and African tongues. Indeed, a notable fact in Marcus Garvey’s use of language is his use of perfect literary English, and his avoidance of Jamaican.

Actually, Garvey used a classical style of English in order to express the greatness and nobility of his race. And through his command of the English language, he wanted to give White people proof of his equality to them, if not superiority, which is completely justified. Yet, Garvey’s attitude is still astonishing in the sense that, putting forward his command of literary English and totally neglecting Patois, he indirectly gave credit to the English language and discredited his own language, namely Jamaican, though the latter echoed its African origins. Second, Garvey who was supposed to be aware and proud of his African background should have used Jamaican in his various writings and speeches – not necessarily always, because they were not only aimed at a Jamaican audience, but at the whole Black Diaspora, especially Black Americans, but at least sometimes – instead of focusing on literary English.

In this manner, just like the Jamaican poet and folklorist Louise Bennett, better known as Miss Lou, he would have contributed to make Jamaicans proud of this unique language which is part of their African cultural heritage; he would have contributed to elevate Patois which is too often considered a sublanguage by Westerners instead of a full language as some linguists still reckon; and he would have been more in line with his desire to be understood by the common man: once he explained to his wife, “I am writing for the masses – people who have not been accustomed to serious reading matter.”²⁴

Besides the literary world, Garvey was also known to be fond of classical music which symbolizes Western elitism and Western music above all. For example, in a music competition organized by the UNIA at Edelweiss Park, “[a]ll the items offered were serious, rather than popular music. They included selections from Haydn, Tchaikovsky, Arditì, Eli [and] Handel.”²⁵

The reasons behind his stance towards classical music were similar to those behind his fondness for the literary world and literary English. His love for such music was his way to uplift his person and in the meantime his people; it was his way to show the equality of the Black and White races. Although his attitude was again comprehensible it seems that he would have been much more Pan-African if he had promoted African music, such as traditional drumming, instead of classical music.

Finally, another significant cultural element of Western civilization is clothing, taking the form of suits or uniforms, the visual trademark of Western society for centuries, a trademark Garvey manifestly opted for considering his appearance in the famous pictures of him. Indeed, most of the time, he was photographed dressed in a dark suit, a ceremonial robe or a Napoleon-like uniform with a plumed hat. For a person who was supposed to praise African cultural heritage, his behaviour could be seen as rather weird. Thus, Marcus Garvey would have been more in line with his Pan-African speeches if he had worn traditional African attire as Jomo Kenyatta or Kwame Nkrumah proudly did, instead of wearing a *clownish* Napoleon-like uniform.

Conclusion

To conclude, Marcus Garvey undeniably played an important role in Pan-Africanism, especially with the UNIA, the Black Star Line and the back-to-Africa movement, which definitely gave him credit, which must be the reason why he was proclaimed Jamaica’s first National Hero in 1964. Nevertheless, his personality was complex, multifaceted and controversial.

Indeed, despite being incontestably a Pan-Africanist, it seems obvious that Garvey was in a way filled with admiration for Western civilization. In fact, through his life, accomplishments and ideologies, Marcus Garvey gives us the impression that he wanted to create an African version of Western society. In other words, it seems that he wanted to build an African empire modelled on Western society with its same socio-cultural codes – same politics, same kind of leaders, same racism, same religion, same education, same economy, same elite, same language, same music, same clothing etc. – but that he did not take at all African cultural heritage into consideration, an approach which surprisingly appears to be in direct contrast to Pan-Africanism. And as a result, his idea of wanting to build an African empire modeled on Western empires clearly seems to result from intellectual colonization.

Thus, besides trying to analyze objectively the complex personality of Marcus Garvey, this paper was aimed at questioning the notion of Pan-Africanism and raising the issue of intellectual colonization – the effects of colonization on the mind – also known as mental enslavement or colonial brainwashing. As mentioned above, Pan-Africanism is a political doctrine, as well as a movement, which seeks to unify and uplift African nations and the African Diaspora as a universal African community. But uplifting Africa can only take place through African pride and through the preservation and promotion of African heritage. And in other words, African cultural heritage and African pride is the foundation of Pan-Africanism.

In conclusion, in the context of globalization, the Westernization of Africa is in progress. This phenomenon is perfectly illustrated, among other things, by the fact that girls are not allowed to wear headscarf in Tunisian schools or that, in some African countries such as Cameroon, the Republic Democratic of Congo, and Kenya²⁶, a debate is raging about the question of banning people from wearing African traditional clothing in the workplace. Consequently, in this construct of ferocious Westernization and intellectual colonization, there is an urgent need to preserve and promote African heritage – cultures, religions, traditional clothing, thought and values. Hence the words of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" echo my concern, which is: "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds."²⁷ And ironically, the author of these famous lyrics is not Bob Marley, but Marcus Garvey himself!

Notes

- ¹ Edmund D. Cronon, *Black Moses* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) 43.
- ² Marcus Garvey, *Current History Magazine* (September 1923) in Bob Blaisdell (Ed.), *Selected Writings and Speeches of Marcus Garvey* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004) 6.
- ³ Marcus Garvey, a speech delivered in New York City (March 1924) in Blaisdell (Ed.), 165.
- ⁴ Marcus Garvey, a speech delivered in New York City (1920) in Cronon, 185.
- ⁵ Marcus Garvey, a speech delivered in New York City (September 1923) in Blaisdell (Ed.), 153.
- ⁶ Robert Hill in *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, dir. Stanley Nelson, PBS Home Video (American Experience), 2001.
- ⁷ Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994) 109.
- ⁸ Chevannes, 109.
- ⁹ Marcus Garvey, a speech delivered in New York City (September 1923) in Blaisdell (Ed.), 153.
- ¹⁰ Marcus Garvey, a speech delivered in New York City (January 1924) in Blaisdell (Ed.), 164.
- ¹¹ Marcus Garvey, a speech delivered in New York City (March 1924) in Blaisdell (Ed.), 165.
- ¹² Blaisdell (Ed.), x.
- ¹³ Marcus Garvey, *The Black Man* (March 1934) in Blaisdell (Ed.), x.
- ¹⁴ Marcus Garvey, a speech delivered in New York City (July 1922) in Blaisdell (Ed.), 75-77.
- ¹⁵ *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) Psalm 68: 31.
- ¹⁶ Genesis 1: 27.
- ¹⁷ See Genesis 9: 20-25. These verses refer to the biblical account of Noah and his sons, which European countries and the Church used to justify and encourage the slave trade.
- ¹⁸ Rupert Lewis, "Marcus Garvey and the Early Rastafarians: Continuity and Discontinuity," in Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Ed.), *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998) 145-158.
- ¹⁹ Jomo Kenyatta qtd. in David Lamb, *The Africans* (New York: Random House Inc, 1982) 59.
- ²⁰ Julius Nyerere, "Ujamaa – The Basis of African Socialism," in *Freedom and Unity* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1966) 164-166.
- ²¹ Marcus Garvey in Amy Jacques Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism* (New York: Collier Books, 1970) 242.
- ²² Marcus Garvey, "White and Black," 1927, l. 10, *The Poetry of Marcus Garvey*, <http://www.africawithin.com/garvey/white_and_Black.htm>.
- ²³ Marcus Garvey, "Blackman!," 1934, l. 1, *The Poetry of Marcus Garvey*, <<http://www.africawithin.com/garvey/Blackman.htm>>.

²⁴ Marcus Garvey in Amy Jacques Garvey, 131.

²⁵ R. N. Murray in J.J. Mills (Ed.), *His Own Account of His Life and Times Jamaica* (Kingston: Collins & Sangster's, 1969) in Philip Sherlock and Hazel Bennett, *The Story of the Jamaican People* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1998) 312.

²⁶ Friday, 11 July 2003, three Kenyan members of parliament, including Roads and Public Works Minister, were thrown out of parliament in violation of dress rules dating back to the colonial era. Their crime? They entered the chamber in traditional African clothes infringing a strict dress code which requires male MPs to wear suits and ties! See "Kenya MPs fight 'Colonial' dress," 17 July 2003, BBC News Africa, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/africa/3070131.stm>>.

²⁷ Bob Marley and The Wailers, "Redemption Song," London: Island/ Tuff Gong, 1980.

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