

BLACK NATIONALISM: CRITIQUES AND SUGGESTIONS

BY

FAGBAMILA FAGUNWA

Black Nationalism has been a social theory, as it relates to gaining freedom from racism, class exploitation, political disenfranchisement, oppression, and repression since prior to the end of the American Civil War. It essentially began as a discussion between black leadership in the mid 1800's as to what should be the social agenda of Africans in the United States. In other words, the "Negro Question," or, what direction should the Negro pursue, integration or emigration. This was a major subject among African leaders in response to white political leaders' "dilemma"; what to do with blacks once freed from slavery? This discussion originated between two prominent and highly visible black leaders and spokesmen; Frederick Douglass and Martin Delaney. Douglass adopted the idea of integration, which suggested that Black people should fight for full citizenship in the United States and all the privileges associated with that social status. In the *Douglass Monthly*, the great abolitionist wrote, "I shall advocate for the Negro, his full and complete adoption into the national family of America. I shall demand for him the most perfect civil and political equality, and that he shall enjoy all rights and privileges and immunities enjoyed by any member of body politic."¹ On the contrary, the anti-thesis to Douglass' solution to African peoples' unfortunate and wretched predicament was an ideology advanced by a brilliant and extremely intellectual African, Martin Delaney. Delaney believed that black people should create a life and nation for themselves and reject American citizenry. This revolutionary scholar is worth quoting at length, because his ideas of Black Nationhood are the foundation of modern Black Nationalism. That is, these ideas are essentially unchanged by Africans who espouse these concepts in 2005. Delaney argued,

"Every people should be the originators of their own designs, the projector of their own schemes, and creators of the events that lead to their destiny-the consummation of their desires. Situated as we are, in the United States, many, and almost insurmountable obstacles present themselves. We are four-and-a-half millions in numbers, free and bond; six hundred thousand free, and three and-a-half millions bond. We have native hearts and virtues, just as other nations; which in their pristine purity are noble, potent, and worthy of example. We are a nation within a nation; -as the poles in Russia, the Hungarians in Austria, the Welsh, Irish, and Scotch in the British dominions. But we have

¹ Douglass, Frederick. "The Present and Future of the Colored Race in America." *Douglass Monthly*. (1863) : 833-36.

been, by our oppressors, despoiled of our purity, and corrupted in our native characteristics, so that we have inherited their vices, and but few of their virtues, leaving us in character, really a *broken people*. Being distinguished by complexion, we are singled out-although having merged in habits and customs of our oppressors-as a distinct nation of people; as the Poles, Hungarians, Irish and others who still retain their native peculiarities, of language, habits, and various other traits. The claims of no people, according to established policy and usage, are respected by any nation, until they are presented in a national capacity."²

Delaney was not alone in this way of thinking in reference to African people being self-determined, self defining, self respecting and a "nation within a nation." Other prominent black nationalists during the late nineteenth century were Henry Highland Garnett, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Edward Wilmot Blyden, and Alexander Crummell.

Black Nationalism developed simultaneously with its counter-part, racial integration. This essay, of course, is not the first to examine these two opposing views of African methods toward gaining freedom and independence. Social critic and scholar Harold Cruse was perhaps the first to analyze the nationalist "strain" vis-à-vis the integrationist "strain." In his massive work, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Cruse sums up the two major social theories and their perpetual existence in black liberation thought. Cruse succinctly insisted that "American Negro History is basically a history of conflict between integrationist and nationalist forces in politics, economics, and culture, no matter what leaders are involved and what slogans used."³ Professor Manning Marable, in his scrutiny of the two divergent ideas, wrote in *Black Leadership* that integrationist identified with America, did not identify themselves as people of African descent, and "oppose any form of institutional separation."⁴ To highlight his contrast, Marable asserted that Black Nationalist identified with other people of African descent throughout the Diaspora and in sub-Saharan Africa, critical of whites, "and they stressed the necessity for blacks to develop their own schools, as well as their own economic and cultural institutions."⁵ Dr. Jacob Carruthers advanced the examination

² Martin Delaney, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1993), 209-210.

³ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From Its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1967), 564.

⁴ Manning Marable, *Black Leadership: Four Great American Leaders and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 43.

⁵ Ibid.

of these diametrically opposed social philosophies and offers an explanation as to why this conflict in ideology exists. The white question, according to Carruthers, serves as the ultimate reason for these two opposing views. In his profound and informative work, *Intellectual Warfare*, Carruthers argued that "During the Two Thousand Seasons of our misery, no issue has obstructed the Pan-African project of liberation more than the White Question."⁶ He defines the White Question as the debate between African leaders in the western world as to the "best way to deal with whites," a problem that can be dated back to the leaders of the Haitian Revolution.⁷

This conflict of ideas has perpetuated from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Black leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Walter White, Paul Robeson, Thurgood Marshall, Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jesse Jackson are all direct descendants of the integrationist "strain." The ideas of Black Nationalism, on the other hand, produced twentieth century leaders in the personages of Noble Drew Ali, Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Oba Adefunmi Ofuntola Ikini I, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), Albert Cleage, Gaidi Obadele and Louis Farrakhan. These two major social theories of African people in the United States not only exist among political leaders, but also among current black intellectual leadership. Integrationist scholars such as Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates, bell hooks, and Michael Eric Dyson produce scholarship in the tradition of their predecessors. Black Nationalists have their army of scholars as well. John Herik Clarke, Yosef ben Jochannan, Jacob Carruthers, Anderson Thompson, Maulana Karenga, Marimba Ani, and Molefi Asante are influential in their writings as it relates to substantiating the ideas of Martin Delaney.

Black Nationalists of the twentieth century were somewhat different from their predecessors of the previous century. The first noticeable difference is most nationalists in the nineteenth century were unanimously and universally Christians. In contrast, the emergence of Islam served as the religious foundation for some Black Nationalist organizations in the twentieth century. Another fundamental difference, in my analysis, is the emergence of Black Nationalist organizations in the 1900's, as opposed to the nineteenth century leaders who were essentially and generally spokesmen for Black Nationalism.

For example, the formation of Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, Oba Adefunmi Ofuntola Ikini I's village of Oyotunji, Albert Cleage's Shrine of the Black Madonna and his Pan African Orthodox Church, Maulana Karenga's US Organization and Gaidi Obadele and Imari Abubakari Obadele's Republic of New Africa were major organizations in the twentieth century. They were paradigmatic in their institutionalization of the Black Nationalists' ideas. Unfortunately, all of these groups, with the exception of Oyotunji village, have failed to produce a town, not to mention a nation, for African people in the United States.

This essay will attempt to provide some critiques of Black Nationalism, and why it has failed as a social theory to mobilize African people in America. This paper is in no way written to ridicule my elders and ancestors who worked for the liberation, freedom, and independence of our people. I would not do that simply because these organizations and leaders have influenced me in one way or another. In short, I am a nationalist due to their work. However, it is vitally important for the twenty-first century African Nationalist to look at our history and examine our failures. This work, furthermore, will also try to offer some innovative ideas and the role Black Nationalism should play in the twenty-first century.

One of the biggest failures of Black Nationalism was and is its inability to produce schools that truly provide knowledge that African people can apply in our desire to construct a state. The establishment of institutions of learning would serve as a direct contrast to the abstract theories created by Europeans and taught in American schools, which are useless when it comes to the application and utilization in African Nation Building. However, no Black Nationalist organization, in its efforts to build a nation, have created schools which have produced priests, politicians, educators, scientists, scholars, economists, physicians, artists, engineers, soldiers, agriculturalists, construction workers, carpenters, students of government, or any of the major occupations that are necessary to properly produce and operate a nation. But, most importantly, no institution of learning among nationalists has grounded African people in the traditions, customs, spirituality, and culture of their ancient African ancestry. Thus, this major failure has caused Black Nationalists generation after generation to be lost and without a concrete agenda in Nation Building.

⁶ Jacob H. Carruthers, *Intellectual Warfare* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1999), 156.

⁷ Ibid.

Another major failure of Black Nationalism was and is its incapacity to produce generational wealth to help institutionalize the ideas of nationhood. Without wealth and a true understanding of capitalism, the shouting of a need to build a black nation will ultimately turn out to be vacuous rhetoric. One must admit that capitalism is a complex political economy, and its foundation essentially consisted of the exploitation of African people and the rise of European wealth. This world phenomenon was highlighted in Trinidadian scholar and former Prime Minister Eric Williams' seminal and classic book, *Capitalism & Slavery*. Yet, this political economy is the ruling idea as it relates to economics and wealth. The ideas put forth by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* set the stages for modern capitalism. Black Nationalists, however, have been unable to participate as a major player in this system due to their failure to produce a product that is in demand locally, nationally, or internationally. Opening up retail stores selling oils, incense, and jewelry hardly qualifies one to be a major participant in a capitalist society. Smith insisted that the wealth of a nation is not determined by money, but by its ability to produce.

Another major failure of Black Nationalism is its leaders' lack of focus on the importance of military development and the study of military science. The emergence of a nation and its military force should take place simultaneously. As the renowned military strategist Du Mu asserted, "The survival or destruction of a country and the life or death of its people may depend on military action, so it is necessary to examine it carefully."⁸ The inability of a nation to defend itself or its interests is vulnerable to foreign conquest. This is obvious when examining the history of African people. The subjugation of African people with systems of domination such as slavery, the slave trade (both Indian Ocean and Atlantic Ocean), and colonialism are prime examples. Foreigners, particularly Europeans and Arabs, have been able to successfully conquer African people due to superior military might.

Black Nationalist leadership styles have not served nation building efforts well. The messianic leader, or the idea that one person will lead the masses of African nationalists from an oppressive state to a nation-state is Eurocentric to begin with and certainly destined to fail, as history has proven. The messianic leadership style originated from European Judeo-Christian

beliefs of Moses freeing the slaves from Egypt. African people naturally could identify with this biblical story, considering their enslavement in the Americas. Molefi Asante gives a profound and critical analysis of this messianic leadership model. He writes, "Our (African people) tenure in the United States is replete with acts of individual courage and valor whereby the one attempts to sacrifice for the whole. Few of these acts result in major victories, but their frequent happening is fact enough to demonstrate the internal thrust for group and even, in some cases, national salvation."⁹ Asante goes on to summarize his critique insisting that "messianism has no tradition in Africa; it became for the African in the United States, enslaved and abused, the one tenet of an apocalyptic Judaic-Platonic heritage that immediately made sense."¹⁰ Europeans world wide have studied this style of leadership and know how to destroy it. This is apparent when examining the incarceration of Marcus Garvey; the political repression of W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and Huey Newton; and the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark.

Another significant factor which contributed to the breakdown of Black Nationalism is its leaderships' utilization of foreign religious philosophies, such as Christianity and Islam, to mobilize Africans of North America in their attempt to build a nation. Some may argue that Christianity and Islam have an African origin. Yet, the fact of the matter is that these religious doctrines have contributed to the religious and cultural obliteration of African people. Unfortunately, these two systems of theology, in particular, were and are considered by many Black Nationalists as the approach to gain freedom and independence. When, in fact, Islam and Christianity served as the spiritual foundation for the total subjugation of African people. The worship of a white Jesus and an Arabic Muhammad has done more harm to African people than the slave trades, slavery, and colonialism combined. In their proselytizing zeal, Islam and Christianity taught African people to hate themselves, while simultaneously convincing them to love and admire the cultures of their oppressors. This is evident when African people in the United State have pictures of a Caucasian "Jesus" in their home, or you hear a brother, who considers himself a "Muslim," proclaiming that "Arabic is the sacred language of God (Allah)." Attempting to build a nation on

⁸ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1988), 41.

⁹ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 139.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

theistic concepts of the enslavers and colonizers of African people has proven to be insufficient.

III

Critiques alone are not sufficient. It is imperative for me to offer some suggestions for the twenty-first century Black Nationalists, if we are serious about nation building. To begin with, Black Nationalists should stop referring to themselves as "Black Nationalists." Instead, we should view ourselves as African Nationalists. The word black is a social semantic which implicitly suggests that the people, who are referred to as such, have no language, culture, history, and, is simply a color. Whereas the word African not only immediately connect us to a vast continent, but to a culture, a common identity with other African people in the world, a rich ancestral tradition, sacred African languages, and an opportunity to draw from a massive and inspiring history. Thus, in short, the word African provides the twenty-first century nationalist with a true sense of self.

Another major suggestion is for African Nationalists to engage in Traditional African Spirituality. That is, to engage in the worship of our ancestors and the spiritual systems they brought to the world. Most nationalist leaders, as previously stated, are overwhelmingly Islamic or Christian. The masses of African Nationalists, therefore, are engaged in these anti-African religions. Dr. Molefi Asante sums it up best in a lecture in Accra, Ghana. He asserted, "I shall begin my lecture with a conclusion: Until an African leader publicly acknowledges, honors and prays to an African God, we Africans will continue to be viewed as pathetic imitators of others, never having believed in ourselves." Hence, non-African religions are outright insufficient in nation building.

What is Traditional African Religion? It is the complete reverence for our ancestors, the forces of nature (polytheism, or the gods), divination, sacrifice, reincarnation, established African priesthoods, medicine, and how the overall energies function in the universe. The greatest civilization that African people have produced, ancient Kemet, engaged in the worship of the ancestors, which is the foundation of Traditional African Religion. In fact, the mummification of the dead, which the Kemites perfected, is the highest form of ancestor worship. Even more significant, the overall structure of the civilization of ancient Egypt was built on the foundation of the traditional priests, especially

during the early dynastic period in the sacred city of Abydos.¹¹

In addition to African Nationalists engaging in Traditional Religion, one would suggest that efforts are made to reconstruct traditional culture, and make it palatable to current times. That is, it would benefit Africans to return to eating the food, wearing the clothes, worshipping the gods, speaking the language, and respecting the overall values and traditions of our ancestors. Culture, moreover, is what would assist nationalists in having a greater sense of unity, something that is painfully lacking. This is so because culture helps people to have a consensus on major values and ideas, despite petty personal disagreements. In our efforts to build a nation, disagreements are encouraged, because serious nationalists would want the best ideas to prevail. However, disunity will only impede our progress. Therefore, African nationalist are encouraged to embark upon the difficult task of tracing ancestral lineages to discover what country and ethnic group in West Africa from whence your forefathers derived. From there, began reconstructing your culture and making coalitions with those who already have done so. Thus, reestablishing traditional culture will help provide the much needed unity when developing our own independent state(s).

Among the important and notable suggestions, economic development must be the focus of twenty-first century nationalists. The idea of African Nationalism will be just an idea, unless serious focus is given to the study of economics. Moreover, before implementing any economic idea, the study of capitalism is crucial. It is this lack of understanding free markets that has contributed to African people, in general, not succeeding in business and commerce. Furthermore, not understanding how this exploitive system works will lead to a repetition of mistakes in business and commerce made by the previous and current generations of African nationalists.

The nationalist community must consider Adam Smith's book, *Wealth of Nations*, as required reading that must be studied. This is so because Smith's book serves as the intellectual foundation of the modern political economy. Published in 1776, the year the United States gained its independence from Britain, the *Wealth of Nations* is highly regarded by modern economists. There should also be a segment within the nationalist community that formally study economics in a

¹¹ Molefi K. Asante, *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton: African World Press, Inc., 1990), 53.

university setting, receiving advance degrees so as to be able to advise leadership on sound economic policies.

With the age of globalization, moreover, African Nationalists will need to analyze global markets and study economies around the world to see where economic opportunities exist. African people can no longer depend on the American economy, considering a gargantuan amount of manufacturing jobs are leaving the United States, settling into developing countries. Thus, it is important for the African Nationalists to become major participants in the global economy, so as to benefit from and not be exploited by it.

While studying economics, it would be of benefit if African people simultaneously acquire land. This should be done by any legal means necessary. Buying land, of course, requires money, effort, and sacrifice. Therefore, African Nationalists should acquiesce and work for others temporarily, with an agenda, to save and buy as much land as possible. With this agenda in mind, thrift and frugality with monetary income is compulsory. As history documents, this concept predates this essay by decades and was advocated by our ancestors, particularly Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey. Yet, the community must implement the economic ideas and make it a reality.

Education is imperative if the nationalist community is to survive in the twenty-first century. The primary liberal arts education among nationalists is to consist of the following; African History, African American History, West African languages, European languages, Geography, modern technology and particularly **math and science**. In addition, there should be a focus on vocational education. That is, the learning of plumbing, carpentry, farming, sewing, and the like is very vital. More importantly, Africans, as part of academic studies, must incorporate Traditional African Theology. Any additional learning is extra and must have some practical use. The mere studying of Aristotle, Plato, European History, humanities, or any other western academic study is a waste of time. In fact, any matriculation into the western academy must be calculated and strategic. In other words, it must be well thought out as to why and how studying in western institutions of higher learning will be beneficial to nation building efforts.

African leadership must be reconsidered. There should never be one person who is considered "the leader." It should consist of a council of

people. Leadership ought to encompass several people in different areas, who have become experts in their respective fields. That is, those who have distinguished themselves in cultural development, economics, politics, scholarship, education, journalism and the like. Thus, it would be very difficult for those who oppose African advancement to kill the "the leader," with hopes of destroying brilliant ideas and agendas. Hence, the opposition would have to contend with a whole army of skilled individuals, whom are incognito, working for the progress of African people.

Those who have leadership skills should avoid high visibility in the media at all cost. This is so because history has shown how this powerful means of communication has destroyed movements and people, as in the case of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and others. History has also illustrated how the media has misrepresented the words of African leaders, a phenomenon that dates back to integrationist leader Frederick Douglass. Entertaining to much media prevents the influential among us from really getting the work done that is necessary for our freedom and independence.

SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

In the late 1800's, a Jewish Nationalist, Theodore Herzl, wrote *The Jewish State*. In this book, Herzl had a vision of a Jewish nation, a state ruled, governed, and inhabited by Jews. In 1948, less than a hundred years of his initial visualization, Israel was established. In my opinion, the realization of a Jewish home land came as a result of Jews utilizing the resources that were around them. Those resources included focusing on education and taking advantage of the economy, in which they lived. In *Tribes*, Joel Kotkin, describing Jews in a different time in history, had this to say, "From the last days of Rome until the end of the Middle Ages, Jews endured not only by trading goods but also through the acquisition of knowledge in areas such as medicine or mathematics from regions as diverse as India and Spain."¹² More importantly, perhaps, Jews were able to establish Israel due to political astuteness, hard work, a general sense of unity, a focus on the importance of Jewish culture, a concentration on economic development and a solid agenda. One may ask "Why did I reflect on Jewish Nationalism?" Because, despite what others may say about them, they have, in fact, successfully established a nation based on the ideas of nationalism.

¹² Joel Kotkin, *Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1992), 7.

Among the Jews, there were systematic efforts and a level of sophistication that existed, in order for them to achieve the reality of constructing a state. However, these two important ingredients have been conspicuously missing in the African Nationalist movement.

The African Nationalist movement must become much more sophisticated than in previous generations. To begin with, there ought to be a change in the image of nationalists. Most nationalists are perceived as irrational extremists without a concrete agenda. They are also viewed as a people of rhetoric and no action, particularly by black people who are considered "mainstream" in the United States. Furthermore, there is an unfortunate perception of Black Nationalists as intellectually shoddy. Thus, nationalists are characterized as overly zealous as it relates to their "blackness" and as having an intense hatred for white people, both of which contributes to the division in the African community and general isolation from "mainstream" Africans. This division and isolation, unfortunately, is due to some of the "mainstream" Africans' acceptance of European culture, politics, religion and the like.

The sophistication of African Nationalists should be such that a brother or sister could work on Wall Street with suit and tie on or sit in an economics course at Harvard undetected, while simultaneously remaining grounded in the traditional culture and focused in African nationalist ideas. In other words, nationalists would benefit from learning to take advantage of the good from the oppressors' civilization, and utilizing it to advance the nationalists community. Hence, this has to be the approach, considering African people do not own or control anything in America.

One of the major requirements for those who consider themselves nationalists in the twenty-first century is to write out an agenda that covers a span of at least 50 years. Some may argue that this idea of thinking into the future is not African. However, my argument is not having an agenda has contributed to the nationalists community's inability to successfully build a nation. This agenda doesn't have to be national in scope and highly visible. In fact, it would have better chances of succeeding if it was not visible. This agenda could begin within African families, in which it would maintain a sense of practicality and reality in achieving agenda goals. The plan should cover two generations, providing instructions for the succeeding generations. In the agenda, the succeeding generations must be

motivated to write agendas for future generations as well. Instructions left for future generations could start with something as small as what to do with the family inheritance.

African Nationalists will be talking about how much they hate the white man and selling beans pies forty years from now unless serious work is done. It is not going to happen in any one person's life time. As His Royal Highness Oba Adefunmi argued, this work will take several life times. This makes sense, understanding that the oppressor of the African race worked for generations to put us in a position of subservience. We have to believe that we will become independent, self sufficient, and well respected in the world. I will close with the words of the Honorable Marcus Garvey: "If you have no confidence in self you are twice defeated in the race of life. With confidence you have won even before you have started."¹³

¹³ Marcus Garvey, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (Dover: The Majority Press, 1986), 11.

