2006

Marcus Garvey and African Francophone Political Leaders.pdf

Babacar Mbaye

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/babacar_mbaye/50/
Marcus Garvey and African Francophone Political Leaders of the Early Twentieth Century: Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou Reconsidered

by

Babacar M'Baye, Ph.D.

Babacar M'Baye (bmbaye@kent.edu) is an assistant professor in the Department of English and the Department of Pan-African Studies at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio.

Introduction

A major tendency in Black Diaspora Studies is that critics represent Black resistance against colonialism as a typically Western phenomenon, ignoring the vital role that African Francophone intellectuals and political leaders of the early twentieth century such as Blaise Diagne, of Senegal, and Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou, of Benin, played in the global Black struggle for liberation and equality. Admittedly, both leaders worked on the crucial issues of Black participation in World War I, the Pan-African Congress of 1919, racism and discrimination in Europe and the United States, in which W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey were heavily involved in the 1910s and 20s. In this context, in order to have a better understanding of the impact of Garvey on Africa, it is important to discuss his relationships with the African Francophone leaders of his generation, and thus contrast them occasionally with those between Du Bois and Africa.

Literature Review

Scholars of Garvey tend to study Garvey’s activism mainly in the context of his relationships with African American leaders of the early twentieth century only, overlooking his personal and ideological interactions with African leaders of that period. While Garvey’s relations with Du Bois and African American nationalism are fairly explored, his relationships with Diagne and Tovalou, or African nationalism, are less known. So far, studies of the relations between Garvey and Africa have focused mainly on the work of the UNIA in Liberia and South Africa, with the exception of Michael O. West’s essay “The Seeds are Sown: The Impact of Garveyism in Zimbabwe in the Interwar Years” (2002). Yet, few critics have examined the effects of Garveyism on Africa beyond Liberia and South Africa.
Nevertheless, a pioneer study in Garvey’s relations with Africa is John Henrik Clarke’s *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa* (1974). Clarke depicted Garvey as a messiah who sacrificed his life, health, family, and happiness “for the cause of Black people” (Clarke 1974: 439). Focusing on African Americans, Clarke said that Garvey gave a strong and enduring message that “a strong Africa would of necessity redound to the good of New World Africans,” showing that Garvey did not neglect the New World for the continent (Clarke 1974: 438-439). Moreover, Clarke suggests connections between Garvey and Africa by showing how, in about 1911, Garvey was aware of “the new anti-colonial literature coming out of West Africa, such as the writings of the great Gold Coast (now Ghana) nationalist E. Casely Hayford” (Clarke 1974: 5). Later, Clarke makes a link between Garvey and Ghana by suggesting that Garvey would not be impressed by the Black man’s situation in today’s world that Kwame Nkrumah called “neocolonialism,” in which he has no armies, navies, or great affairs (Clarke 1974: 384). Clarke argues that both Garvey and Nkrumah anticipated the chaos that the lack of racial unity and economic cooperation has brought to the Black world today.

Furthermore, Clarke discusses Garvey’s ideology by revealing how Garvey’s “Back to Africa” teaching was consistent with Nkrumah’s call for the creation of an independent African nation. According to Clarke, “Nkrumah dreamed of organizing all Africans in the United States so that they might return and perform useful services for Africa” (Clarke 1974: 327). Finally, Clarke posits that Garvey and Nkrumah were working for the same goal from different locations. “While Nkrumah was finishing college in America and writing his important booklet, *Toward Colonial Freedom*, Marcus Garvey was in London trying to hold together the structure of the UNIA while war clouds were gathering in Europe” (Clarke 1974: 327).

Another study of Garvey’s relations with Africa is Ali Mazrui’s *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (1986). Focusing on Garvey’s influence on Liberia, Mazrui conceived Garveyism as an initial important stage in Africans’ attempt to re-Africanize their identity and political future with its roots in the Pan-Africanism of the Diaspora. Mazrui writes: “The story of the quest for re-Africanisation includes not only the movement generated by Marcus Garvey and commanding the following of millions of Afro-Americans early this century, but also the establishment of Liberia as an example of Black Zionism, a physical Black return to ancestry” (Mazrui 1986: 112-113).
One additional study of Garvey’s connections with Africa is in Rupert Lewis’s *Marcus Garvey: Anti-Colonial Champion* (1988). Discussing Garvey’s influence on the history of protest in East Africa, Lewis refers to the infamous statement of Jomo Kenyatta to C.L.R. James that “in 1921, Kenya nationalist unable to read would gather round a reader of Garvey’s newspaper, the *Negro World*, and listen to an article two or three times. Then they would run various ways through the forest carefully to repeat the whole, which they had memorized, to Africans hungry for some doctrine which lifted them from the servile consciousness in which Africans lived” (Lewis 1988: 165).

This quotation mischaracterizes continental Africans of the early post-World War era as having a “servile consciousness” and ignores the self-activity and subtle awareness of these Africans about their social, political, and economic status and their contentious relations to the West during this period. However, in spite of its misrepresentation of Africans, the quotation is important because it shows that Garvey influenced the ideologies of the Kenyan nationalists and populations who resisted the British invaders.

Garvey’s impact on Kenya’s struggle against colonization is also visible in the revelations that Cronon gives in *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (1955) when he states:

After the dread Mau Mau terrorists began their murderous depredations in Kenya in 1951, Negroes in the United States and elsewhere were quick to tie the developments in Kenya to Garvey’s African nationalist movement. “Is Mau Mau the Hand of Marcus Garvey?” asked the Chicago Defender in a banner headline over a feature article that concluded: “And wherever in Africa the natives seek to throw off white domination, the same Marcus Garvey is revered.” The leading Jamaican newspaper, the Kingston Daily Gleaner, even credited Garvey with personally converting Jomo Kenyatta, the Mau Mau leader, to the philosophy of Africa for the Africans. (Cronon 1955: 216-217)

This quotation shows that Blacks of the Diaspora were aware of Garvey’s influence on Kenyans’ fight for independence from colonization. Such influence is also visible in *Decolonizing the Mind*, where Kenyan critic Ngugi wa Thiong’o describes Garvey as one of the descendants of the African peoples of the Diaspora such as C.L.R. James, W.E.B. Du Bois, and George Padmore, who have “contributed much to Africa’s cultural and political growth” and who were “part and parcel of Africa’s struggle for independence” (Thiong’o 1986: 98). Seeking to answer the eternal question, “What is the connection between African and the West Indian and Afro-American,” Ngugi asserts:
We have the same bio-geographic roots: the people of the West Indies and Afro-America are Africans who, a few hundred years ago, were brutally uprooted from the African continent. We have shared the same past of humiliation and exploitation under slavery, and colonialism: we have also shared the glorious past of struggle, and fight against the same force. Equally important we have the same aspirations for the total liberation of all the black people in the world. Their literature, like our literature embodies all the above aspects of our struggle for a cultural identity. (Thiong’o 1986: 98)

Ngugi’s observation suggests the continuous impact that West Indians and African Americans have had on African struggle for independence and cultural renaissance. One example of this impact is visible in Nigeria where intellectuals are very prone to expressing thanks and tributes to Garvey for his support of their decolonization struggle. For example, in The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (1955), Edmund David Cronon quotes a 1948 poem by the Nigerian writer Osita Egbuniwe which reflects a strong sense of African nationalism that resonates Garvey’s Pan-Africanism, and thus sang praises to Garvey:

Nigeria, oh my Nigeria,

For thy redemption brave Garvey fell,
But yet in the gang of the immortals,
Thy sons shall fight unseen by mortals,
And ere long regain thy pride, oh Nigeria.

Nigeria, oh my Nigeria,
Preserve and arm thy nationalists,
Infuse in them the immortals’ genius,
For thy sons to lead and thy shores to save
From the traitor’s bows and the oppressor’s scepter. (Cronon 1955: 216)

The influence of Garveyism is evident in the poet’s emphasis on the passing of nationalist spirit of resistance from the old martyrs of Nigeria’s independence-struggle to those of future generations. The idea of the immortality and indefatigability of African resistance, which is central to Garveyism, is the core element of Egbuniwe’s verse. This concept is given full vitality by the author’s representation of the independence struggle of his country (Nigeria) as an ongoing search for “redemption” in which countless generations take part. This cyclical and never-ending continuation of Black resistance across land and sea was a key element of Garvey’s ‘Back-to-Africa movement’, as evident in the oceanic metaphor of both the name and the goals of his Black-Star-Line shipping project of the 1920s.
Likewise, the relationships between the Beninese Prince Kojo Tovalou Houënom and Garvey are microcosms of the interactions between African Francophone political leaders of the 1920s and the Jamaican nationalist. Discussing Diagne’s relations with Garvey, a few critics have represented Diagne as a “sell-out” or, to choose a Fanonian construct, a “Black Skin in White Mask,” yet failing to realize that his ideas about France were not far apart from those of Garvey and Tovalou, even if the latter’s Pan-Africanism was stronger than Diagne’s. Hence, by uncovering and discussing the key role that Tovalou played in Pan-Africanism and his relations to Garveyism, one can understand the vital role that African Francophone intellectuals and leaders of the 1920s contributed to the fight against oppression, and the conceptualization of modernity in the Black world.

In a second discourse of relevant literature, in “Who Speaks for Africa? The René Maran—Blaise Diagne Trial in 1920s Paris” (2003), Alice L. Conklin introduces a concept desperately needed in the study of the history of African political and intellectual figures; based on the idea that an African can be both African and French and more, in the same way an African American or a African Caribbean can be both black, white, and more.

Therefore, given the examples of Maran and Diagne, Conklin argues that “both of these men moved in multiple worlds with considerably more complex identities than simply black or white, French or noir that the sharp dichotomies of Pan-Africanism might suggest” and examine the “complexities that echoed the permeable and unstable boundaries of the color line overseas and at home” (Conklin 2003: 303-304). Conklin’s theory is somewhat problematic because it posits that a fluid African Francophone political and cultural identity can transcend the racial binaries of a dichotomous (or narrow version) Pan-Africanism that will preclude Pan-Africanism itself, a rationale that represents multiculturalism and plural consciousnesses as being antithetical to Pan-Africanism. On the other hand, Conklin’s theory is convincing, because it suggests that double or multiple consciousnesses exist in the political and cultural identities of Black people of the Diaspora and Africa, especially when considering (unfortunately) that African generations from the post-enslavement era to the present are not perceived as complex and “fragmented” identities, because they are continuously imagined as a homogenous entity.

In his phenomenal work *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003), Brent Hayes Edwards presents an original theory about the relations between Africa and its Diaspora wherein he criticizes the narrow ways scholarship on the African American culture of the 1920s “has tended to emphasize U.S.-bound themes of cultural nationalism, civil rights protest, and uplift in the literary culture of the ‘Harlem Renaissance’” (Edwards 2003: 2-3).
Dismissing such limited scope, Edwards urges critics to conceptualize African American literary and political culture of the early twentieth century as being transnational as he refers to Robert Stepto, Michel Fabre, and Melvin Dixon, and argues that “the Renaissance was international in scale both in terms of where its contributors came from and in terms of it being merely the North American component of something larger and grander” (Edwards 2003: 3).

Later, Edwards contends that 1920s Paris was a major site of Black internationalism where “early Francophone Antillean and African intellectuals (such as René Maran, Kojo Tovalou, Louis Achille, Léo Sajous, and Léon-Gontran Damas) were equally mobile in the period, in Europe, Africa, and in some cases the United States as well” (Edwards 2003: 4). Edward’s argument shows that Caribbean and African internationalism in Paris were very important after World War I when France was one of the key places where thousands of African Americans, Antilleans, and Africans were able to ‘link up’ (Edwards 2003: 3). Yet while he perceives Paris as a major site of Black internationalism, Edwards pays little attention to the contributions of African Francophone intellectuals such as Tovalou or Diagne, who made strong connections with their brothers and sisters of the Diaspora during the 1920s. This lack of attention on Tovalou and Diagne makes one wonder whether or not Edwards repels the Pan-African unity that internationalism created between the Black people of the Diaspora and Africa during that time.

**Prince Kojo Tovalou Houénou**

Tovalou was born on April 25, 1887 in Porto-Novo (Zinsou and Zoumenou 2004: 44) Benin (formerly Dahomey), a state-city that later fell under French domination by the end of the nineteenth century. Tovalou was the nephew of Béhanzin, the late king of Dahomey, “who was deported to Martinique after his kingdom was conquered by France, and who later returned from exile to die in Algeria” (Hill 1985, Vol 5: 750). Tovalou spent most of his life in Paris fighting for the independence of Africa from European colonization and for unity between Africans, African Americans, and Caribbeans. His ideology of alliance between Blacks of Africa and of the Diaspora had great impact on Marcus Garvey who saw him as an opportunity to expand the international scope of the UNIA into the African Francophone community at home and abroad. In *Race First*, Tony Martin asserts:
Kojo suggested an alliance between the UNIA and his own Ligue Universelle pour la Défense de la Race Noire. This alliance would spearhead a worldwide federation of race organizations, in which the UNIA would provide the “heavy artillery.” Kojo is also said to have led an abortive, UNIA-inspired revolt in Dahomey in 1925. During his trip to France in 1928, Garvey claimed to have “cemented a working plan with the French Negro” and to have established a “sub-European headquarters” in France, and joined the Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre, a Paris-based Pan-African organization associated with the French Communist Party and the Comintern (Martin 1976: 115-116).

On August 31, 1924, Tovalou delivered a speech at the Convention of the UNIA in Carnegie Hall in New York. In this speech, he showed his allegiance to Garvey’s idea that the problem of Blacks in the twentieth century was global, and that Blacks of the Diaspora should help resolve Africa’s predicament. Tovalou said:

I brought you the greetings and salutations of Africa . . . I reiterate to you Africa’s farewell. The UNIA has one supreme object, and that is Africa and its redemption. I do not know in detail the proceedings of the convention, but I know sufficient of its work in its various sessions to make all hearts vibrate in unison and solidarize or consolidate our efforts for this great objective—the redemption of Africa. The problem of the race is not national, but international. At the meeting of the League of Nations in Geneva the late President Wilson forgot one thing, and that was to take into consideration the problem of the races. For him it was an acute problem, a gordi[a]n knot that could not be severed. At Geneva we also want and must have our place, so that we can seek to have our own, and Africa, the cradle of the Black race, will in [the] course of time have her own government and the world at large will realize that Africans are capable of their own government and will be welcomed in the concert of nations (Hill 1985, Vol 5: 823).

In The Practice of Diaspora, Edwards interprets Tovalou’s statements as “stunningly radical and hopelessly naïve” propositions (Edwards 2003: 103), suggesting that his views on Pan-Africanism are not far from Paul Gilroy’s in its dismissal of the idea of a shared Black cultural and political destiny as essentialist. In The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993), Gilroy contends that the second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, that was organized in Rome in 1959, was a determining moment when Negritude writers and their modernist ally Richard Wright agreed, at least in the published proceedings, "that the unity of culture was not to be guaranteed by the enduring force of a common African heritage" (Gilroy 1993: 195). Gilroy praises the proceedings of the conference for defining "the colonial experience" as "an additional source of cultural synthesis and convergence"(Gilroy 1993: 195). Yet, he deplores the actual sense of Black mystified unity and ragged anti-colonialism that the participants of the Congress uniformly expressed. He writes:
The key term [Colonial Experience] was used broadly so as to include slavery, colonialism, racial discrimination, and the rise of national(ist) consciousness(es) charged with colonialism's negation. Lastly, the technological economic, political, and cultural dynamics of modernisation were identified by the conferences planners as factors that were fostering the unity of black cultures by forcing them to conform to a particular rhythm of living (Gilroy 1993: 195).

Gilroy's statement minimizes the cultural and political importance of the Black anti-colonialism and nationalism that Alioune Diop, the Editor of Présence Africaine, and the other supporters of Negritude, expressed at the Rome Congress. By representing this Black anti-colonialism and nationalism as cultural and political essentialisms, he denies their relevance in modernity and in the ongoing struggle of Blacks worldwide against oppression.

Reminiscent of Gilroy’s portrayal of Negritude’s celebration of Black culture as essentialism, Edwards describes Tovalou’s ideology as monolithic: “Tovalou Houénou’s ardor for Black internationalism was matched only by his ideological innocence—he held the simplistic notion that all intellectuals of African descent are ultimately working toward the same end” (Edwards 2003: 103). Edwards’s caricature of Tovalou’s Black internationalism as “innocent” and “simplistic” suggests the constant stereotypes that Western intellectuals are prone to perpetuate by associating the efforts of Africans to create their own version of modernity through transnational alliance as essentialism or “naïve” romanticizing of history. Tovalou traveled from France to speak to Garveyites, not because he shared any ideology of racial or cultural separatism, but because he partook in Garvey’s idea that racial solidarity could help Blacks of Africa and the West fight against colonialism and racial segregation while protecting Africa from European imperialism.

Tovalou’s alliance with Garvey’s Pan-Africanism is also visible when, in his address at Carnegie Hall, he endorsed not only Garvey’s immigration to Liberia project, but also his plans to extend his influence across the African continent. Tovalou told the UNIA: “You have chosen as your haven or port of landing that portion of Africa called Liberia. And, as its name indicates, it symbolizes and stands for liberty. And all other parts of Africa await you, and shall be thither guided, not by a little star of night, but thither shall your path be guided by the great sun which illuminates all Africa” (Hill 1985, Vol 5: 823). Tovalou’s words are the strongest validation from a highly educated African intellectual of the 1920s that Garvey received during his lifetime. Tovalou’s point of view contradicts the notion that Garvey was an imperialist or a colonialist by recognizing the importance of racial alliance in the development of nationhood and technological advancement in Africa. Although he was proud of the forms of cultural and industrial development that already existed in traditional Africa, he strongly believed that Africans could take advantage of the intellectual, artistic, and scientific know-how of the Black Diaspora to advance Africa. Referring to the delegations of UNIA members that Garvey had sent to Liberia in the 1920s, Tovalou asserted:
What I have heard and seen I shall take back to my people, and next year, when I shall visit Liberia during my tours in Africa, I shall have the pleasure of saluting those of you who shall be in Liberia. . . . You are the elite of this race of ours; you will bring to the shores of Africa, our motherland, your Western civilization; you will bring to your brothers in Africa the arts and industries of the world in which you are living; you will bring all the education and morality and all that you have learned and all that you now possess you will bring over, and there shall be a fusion and community of ideas and spirit in our great motherland, Africa (Hill 1985, Vol 5: 823-824).

Tovalou’s statement reflects the elitism and patronizing attitudes towards Africans that Garvey, Du Bois, Diagne, and almost all the Black intellectuals of the 1920s expressed, consciously or unconsciously. The idea that Africa needed Western civilization, morality, and education was a blatant example of this condescension. This Western-influenced patronizing weakens the allegiance of the early Black intellectuals towards Africa, by creating irreconcilable paradoxes in how the leaders of the Black Diaspora were fighting Western exceptionalism and centrism while occasionally reinforcing these stereotypes. Yet, as visible in Tovalou’s quotation, Eurocentrism did not prevent some Black leaders of the Diaspora from maintaining a strong Pan-Africanism that overcame the prejudices and stressed the unity between Blacks of Africa and of the Diaspora. Rather than simply mentioning this unity, Tovalou points out the need to concretize it in a real blend between the people, ideas, and spirits of Blacks of Africa and of the Diaspora that could uplift the conditions of Blacks worldwide. Both Garvey and the UNIA admired this pragmatic quality of Tovalou’s Pan-Africanism. In its edition of August 30, 1924, the *Negro World* praised this Pan-Africanism as follows: “It was for the Negroes of the world, he said, under whatever flag they might be, in whatever organization[,] to unite their forces and go marching back to their motherland and wrest it from the common enemy” (Hill 1985, Vol 5: 750). This passage shows Tovalou’s strong allegiance to Garvey’s “Back-To-Africa” thesis, which gave Blacks of the Diaspora the sacred responsibility to go to Africa and protect it from Western imperialism.

Generally speaking, Tovalou’s ideology of resistance against colonialism and racism coincided with Garvey’s on other levels as well, and this convergence is noticeable in Tovalou’s address, “The Problem of Negroes in French Colonial Africa,” he delivered at the Inter-Allied School of Higher Social Studies at the University of Paris, in February 24, 1924. The speech indicates that Tovalou had a dualistic relationship with Garvey’s Pan-Africanism, and while he espoused it, he also slightly distanced himself, because his concept of African culture transcended the notion of racial and cultural separations that seemingly weakened Garveyism, and to an extent, prevented it from taking deep root in African soil.

Specifically, Tovalou’s speech at the Inter-Allied School reveals many points of intersections between his Pan-Africanism and Garvey’s. First, it is important to note that both Garvey and Tovalou believed that the Western concept of civilization was inconsistent with the Western ideal of liberty and justice, and that such concepts had to be reframed in order to repair the damage of imperialism and restore the voice of the colonized masses. In *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, or Africa for Africans*, which was first published in 1923, Garvey revealed this populist sentiment by anticipating the end of “a civilization that is vicious, crafty, dishonest, immoral, irreligious and corrupt” and its substitution by the world’s populace for a civilization “based upon freedom, human liberty and true democracy” (Garvey 1986: 31). In this sense, Garvey expected civilization to mean a world in which Black people can play their part as equals (Garvey 1986: 31). In a similar tone, Tovalou criticized the Western concept of civilization on the premise that it was primarily based on oppression and exclusion of the voices of the world’s masses among which Blacks were the most oppressed. Using the rationale that “The whole fatality that burdens Eschyllian tragedies cannot compare with the blackness of the African tragedy” (Houénou 1924: 204), Tovalou pertinently showed that Western civilization was a history that was built on the suffering of Africans. Tovalou told Europe that it was Africa that furnished contingents for penal labour—this Africa with whose unhappy history you are unacquainted, but which some day, one of her sons will outline for you in darts of fire,—a monument of shame for that civilization of which you boast. Without humanity there is no civilization. (Houénou 1924: 203-204)

The sentiments in Tovalou’s assertion rhyme well with Garvey’s. Both leaders express their remonstrance against a European colonial exploitation of Africa that was grounded on a civilization of violence. Tovalou gave a real-life quality to the words that Garvey had chosen to express the brutality and immorality of Western conquests in Africa. Tovalou said: “Under cover of civilization, men are hunted like deers, plundered, robbed, killed; and these horrors are presented afterwards in eloquent orations as blessings. Hypocrisy and knavery are added to crimes!” (Houénou 1924: 204). Alternatively, Tovalou wanted the West to substitute its civilization of conquest and exclusion with one of peace, and integration of values and people brought together through the restitution of the rights and humanity of the colonized. Hence, he rightly pointed out that:

We [African people] wish to recognize our rights to citizenship—the elementary rights of man—and that living your life, suffering your sorrows, and rejoicing in your joys, we might be called to share your destiny, good or bad, but which we accept sincerely, loyally and faithfully. (Houénou 1924: 207)
In reading Tovalou’s statement, one notices a valorization of European civilization that might, at first, seem contrary to his radical Black nationalism. Understanding the uniqueness of Tovalou’s concept of Black culture, which was as unique as those of Maran and Diagne, helps us validate the West-African notion of modernity that Western scholars perceive as being less significant than their African American or Caribbean counterparts. In Tovalou’s philosophy of modernity, the populations of the French colonies in Africa need not reject European civilization totally. For example, he believed that it was important for the African to receive an education that will assure “his evolution and his adaptation to European civilization” (Houénou 1924: 206). But Tovalou said that such adaptation to European civilization should not prevent Africans from being steeped into their own traditions, and declared:

They [Africans] have less instruction, education, and adaptation to European civilization, but they kept, more than we have, the true and solid qualities of which human worth is formed, and we benefit by their conscience, their knowledge and their experience. They have lived in simple surroundings where human sentiments bloom spontaneously. They know nothing of your complications, or your mixed conceptions of life. They understand nothing of your economic cares, or your worries, your irritations and your nervousness. (Houénou 1924: 206)

Tovalou’s conception of the modern African worldview evidently shows sharps contrasts with the European worldview, and could be considered parts of the foundations of African modernity to outline ways modern Africans theorized their relations with one another. This worldview emphasizes a peaceful and harmonious vision of humanity and civilization that contrasts with the violent and disintegrated images in a Western culture based on punishment, exclusion, and retribution. Tovalou’s concept of African modernity is humane and complex, premised on the African’s transformation of his/her world from the inside-out, meaning that any adaptation to Western values is a natural choice to be accepted or rejected by Africans without outside impositions. Contrary to critics Émile Derlin Zinsou and Luc Zouméno’s rationales, Tovalou’s modernity does not connote the forced inculcation of French and European civilization into the cultures of Africans. Rather, Tovalou’s theory of modernity suggests the Africans’ right not only to decide which assimilation to other cultures might occur in their societies, but also the extent to which they will occur.

Accordingly, Tovalou’s idea of assimilation is a coded-word for incremental independence from colonial rule. He tells France that there can be neither half-measures nor compromise in the solutions to the corruption, violence, and inefficiency of its administration in the African colonies (Tovalou 1924: 205). The only solution is: “Absolute autonomy for the Colonies. With imperial relations to the Motherland on general questions; or otherwise total, complete assimilation without frontier—without distinction of race” (Tovalou 1924: 205). Here, Tovalou hits the weak nerve of the French because he knew that they would rather let Africans become independent than have them assimilate into French society.
In calling for either “assimilation” into Western society or complete “autonomy” from it, Tovalou exploited the internal paradoxes and cultural anxieties that prevented France and the rest of Europe from knowing what to do with Africans after World War I.

**Disconnections Between Tovalou and Garvey**

As pointed out earlier, Tovalou’s method of Pan-Africanist resistance against colonization was sometimes different from that of Garvey. Unlike Garvey’s, Tovalou’s strategy was based on negotiations with France. Yet, like Garvey’s, Tovalou’s tactic was occasionally based on denunciation of the tragic impact of imperialism on Africa. In a tone that reminds us of Garvey’s, Tovalou urged France to be true to its ideals of universal justice by ending colonization and restoring the rights of Africans. Tovalou said: “We cry, “Justice!” “Reparation!” While we tolerate robbery, rape, brigandage and assassination. In the Colonies, it is the wholesale sabotage of all the institutions and of all the principles that are valued throughout the civilized world” (Tovalou 1924: 205). In this sense, for Tovalou, a perpetuation of French colonization would signify a continuation of anarchy and dispossession and show that France had no intent of sharing the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789 with its colonies. Tovalou wrote:

Not long ago a circular appeared forbidding the entry into Africa of the history of the French Revolution. Indeed, it is mortifying—above all, dangerous to teach in the Colonies that which free, hardy and powerful minds have conceived and realized in the period of 1789 and during the various Revolutions that have been, so to speak, the corollaries of this violent explosion. You cannot, with impunity, carry through the world these flaming torches that are the rights of man and which the French Convention has upheld uncompromisingly in the face of all despotism and of all tyranny. (Tovalou 1924: 205).

Tovalou’s words anticipate the struggle for the independence of African colonies from France as a natural movement from domination that was consistent with the concept of universal equality of the French Revolution. In this sense, Tovalou placed himself in a French cultural framework that later alienated him from Garvey’s anti-French sentiments. In their seminal biography of Tovalou, Zinsou and Zouménou described the relationships between Tovalou and France as *francité*, that is a sublime adoration of the French modern city as a privileged location distinguished by advantageous geography, cultural sites, and diplomatic institutions (149). As Zinsou and Zouménou suggest, Tovalou praised the humanism and universalism of the French and contrasted them with the brutality and egocentricity of the British imperialist not knowing that such tribute to France displeased and disappointed Garvey (Zinsou and Zouménou 2004: 149). It is not surprising that Garvey opposed Tovalou for lauding French universalism, because, as shown in the racism against the Senegalese Boxer Battling Siki in the 1920s, Paris was not devoid of xenophobia and racial prejudices.

Brent Edwards has argued that 1920s Paris allowed African Americans to have “a special sort of vibrant, cosmopolitan space for interaction that was available neither in the United States nor in the colonies” (Edwards 2003: 4-5). Yet Edwards contended that The City of Light allowed African Americans to find “that the abstract ideal of worldwide black unity and culture became a tangible reality. . . . French colonialism and primitivism thus paradoxically combined to foster a vision of unity” (Edwards 2003: 5). What Edwards does not stress, which Garvey knew, was that the so-called exceptional liberties African Americans and Africans found in 1920s Paris were adjacent to intrinsic racism and primitivism against Blacks. For example, the paintings made by the French about Africans from the late nineteenth century to the middle twentieth century were based on animalistic and exotic distortions of Blacks. In Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture, Petrine Archer-Straw discussed times when in 1892, French newspapers and magazines such as Le Journal Illustré, Le Tour du monde, and Le Petit Journal “supplemented their accounts of the French victory over Dahomey with sensational stories of African savagery and cannibalism, and Tales of Dahomey became a particularly popular source of Parisian entertainment” (Archer-Straw 2000: 32). Later in her book, Archer-Straw describes the moment in 1915 when the African American dancer Josephine Baker was featured on the front cover of La Revue nègre with a primitivistic poster drawn by Paul Colin (Archer-Straw 2000: 122). Archer-Straw writes: “She [Baker] has a large grinning mouth, accentuated by heightened lip colour (in this case, scarlet red), and wide bulging eyes with small startled pupils” (Archer-Straw 2000: 122). Archer-Straw’s statement shows that 1920s Paris was as racist and primitivistic towards Blacks as 1892 Paris had been, and that such mischaracterization of Blacks was done at the expense of Africans and African Americans and Antilleans whose humanity and equality were already denied in their own land.

What then could have attracted Tovalou to France at a time when racism and stereotyping of Blacks were vivid realities in its metropolis? Why would Tovalou hold on dearly to francité at a time when the French had represented his Dahomeyan people as cannibals and savages? The answers to these questions could be found in the fact that Tovalou knew that Black modernity and its struggle from Western colonialism could not escape the gaze of the French colonialists who were unable to measure their humanity without opposing it to an inferior and exotic Black “other.”

Another divergence between Tovalou and Garvey is noticeable in the August 30, 1924, issue of the Negro World in which one anonymous author nuanced its praises of Tovalou’s Pan-Africanism by raising concerns about his close relationships with France. The anonymous author wrote: “He [Tovalou] lauded France’s sense of justice while deprecating passionately the abuses of her agents committed in Africa” (Hill, Vol 5: 750). This passage reflects a severance between Tovalou and Garvey on the question of France’s significance in Africa’s destiny.
While Garvey demanded France’s total separation from Africa, Tovalou, like Diagne, called for an integration of France into the welfare of the future African states, unconsciously reinforcing the stronghold of colonialism that Garvey was adamantly against.

Another disconnection between Tovalou and Garvey is noticeable in their different conceptions of the meaning of race. While he took part in Garvey’s struggle for global Black liberation, Tovalou refused to endorse Garvey’s radicalism. This rebuttal is apparent in a speech Tovalou gave to an audience of UNIA members on August 17, 1924. The address was recorded in the September 15, 1924 issue of Les Continents, which was the review of the Ligue Universelle pour la Défense de la Race Noire that Tovalou had founded in July 1924. Iris Schmeisser describes this organization as “a local Francophone cultural-political pressure-group composed of white liberals and African and Antillean activists” (Schmeisser 2004: 122). The September issue of this magazine, which lasted half a year only, had an article which introduced Tovalou as “Notre directeur en Amérique: Du Liberty Hall au Carnegie Hall et à Philadelphie” (Schmeisser 2004: 124), suggesting the close attention that the Francophone world in Africa and the Caribbean gave to Tovalou’s visit in the United States. Tovalou’s supporters, who were mostly members of the LUDRN (Ligue Universelle Pour La Défense de la Race Noire), were anxious to hear Garvey’s response to their ideologies that were very similar with those of the UNIA on some levels. Iris S. Schmeisser writes: “Articles published in the Negro World as well as in Les Continents point to the fact that there was a mutual exchange and recognition between the UNIA, the pan-African mass movement led by Garvey, and the LUDRN. . . Though the LUDRN was far removed from Garvey’s separatist “dream for a Negro Empire,” there were aspects of Garveyism that appealed to the activists behind Les Continents, such as the idea of pan-African solidarity to counter the oppressive forces of colonialism, racism and Western domination, and more importantly, the recognition and vindication of the African cultural legacy” (Schmeisser 2004: 124).

And although Tovalou and the LUDRN agreed with Garvey on the issues above, they opposed what they viewed as Garvey’s imperialist potential or his dismissal of the ability of Africans to govern themselves. The September 15, 1924 issue of Les Continent quoted Tovalou saying: “I am aware of the vanity of oratory formulae and of the most well-thought-out ideas […] Africa, which is the oldest among the continents, can take care of itself better than could the ghosts created by Wilsonian hallucinations” (Zinsou and Zouménou 2004: 148).³

Tovalou’s remarks are critical of Garvey’s obsession with the Wilsonian concept of democracy that emerged from the Versailles conference of 1919, where the annexation of the former German colonies in Africa was being debated.
Following the lead of Woodrow Wilson, the United States, Britain, and France decided to put these colonies under “a mandate for the peoples judged incapable of immediate self-government . . . Europeans would rule, though not possess, the former colonies” (Stein 1986: 48). Prior to such compromise, “Wilsonianism ruled out outright annexation, but it also ruled out instant independence” (Stein 1986: 48). From this perspective, Wilsonianism promoted the imperialistic ideology that African colonies need the tutelage of Western powers until they could govern themselves.

Tovalou’s critique of Wilsonianism needs to be placed in two contexts. The first is Garvey’s early beliefs that Wilson’s speech at Versailles on the Fourteen Points would include references on the independence of African colonies from Europe. In *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, or Africa for Africans*, Garvey described the participation of over 2,100,000 Black soldiers from America, the West Indies, and Africa in World War I as the answer of Blacks to “the call of Woodrow Wilson, the call of a larger humanity” (Garvey 1986: 99). One year after the end of the war, Garvey found out that the freedom of Blacks was not on the minds of the Western powers who rushed to carve the world for themselves after the first war. Garvey said: “We never heard one syllable from the lips of Woodrow Wilson, from the lips of Theodore Roosevelt in America, from the lips of Bonar Law or Balfour in England, as touching anything relative to the destinies of the Negroes . . . of the world” (Stein 1986: 49). Garvey’s disillusionment about the Versailles conference shows that he overcame the allure of Wilsonianism that had given him false hope and pretenses about the West and its relations with the Black world. Uncovering the myth of Wilsonianism, he realized, like Tovalou did, that the only way Blacks could survive was to create their own socio-economic power and remember that African development is a process that can occur only from the inside-out rather than from the outside-in.

Marcus Garvey played a major role as a defender of African political independence, economic autonomy, and intellectual pragmatism. Working with genuine African leaders such as Tovalou, as well as with many African political pioneers whose work need to be examined, Garvey paved the way for African independence in his own ways.

Correspondingly, Garvey’s major role towards Africa is his status as advocate of African freedom from Western imperialism and his sustained emphasis on the necessity for Africans to be the own agents of their development. Like Tovalou, he strongly believed that Africans, in the broader sense of the term, are and will be the main agents of their progress, even when they ask for the support of the Diaspora, which they envision as a fruitful exchange of ideas grounded on respect for the agency, modernity, and complexity of Africa’s history, cultures, and realities.
Notes


3 The original sentence in French is: “Je connais la vanité des formules oratoires et des écrits les mieux pensés et médités […] L’Afrique, le plus vieux de tous les continents, peut bien disposer d’elle-même plus légitimement que ces fantômes créés par les hallucinations wilsoniennes.” (Zinsou and Zouménou 2004: 148).

Works Cited


