Blacks in Diaspora

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Introduction

There seems to be something illogical and almost irrational in the application of this colour term, black. There are contradictions, complexities, and ambiguities in the use of skin pigmentation as a basis of racial segregation. The term black is a concept that has practical implications for Africans and people of African descent world wide. There are two main segments to the black world i.e. continental Africa and the Africans in the Diaspora\(^1\). The focus of this paper is the African in Diaspora.

The Diaspora

Diaspora is a name given to the Jewish emigrants in the time of the face of the earth\(^2\). Diaspora also means 'a scattering'. It is a collective term applied to the Jews dispersed throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa after the Babylonian captivity 6\(^{\text{th}}\) Century B.C.

Literarily therefore, Diaspora means the dispersion of peoples of African origins and culture all over the world. Historically African Diaspora into the Western hemisphere has come to mean the period of Trans Atlantic Slave trade. The African Diaspora into the western hemisphere, involved the massive dispersal of over 10 million men, women and children from a homeland into sub-Sahara Africa for a period of 350 years (1500 – 1850)\(^3\).

The concentration of this work therefore, shall be the Africans in the new world, their activities, political and cultural phenomenon aimed at regenerating and unifying them abroad as a unit capable of glorifying its past and inculcating values in their traditions.

The story of Atlantic Slave trade apparently began in 1442 when ten black males and females were exchanged for two or three moors of noble birth captured off the African coast. They were later sold in a market in Lisbon\(^4\).

Portugal’s first African slaves arrived in Hispaniola in 1502. by 1560, the ratio of Ngroes to Europeans in Hispaniola was 15:1. The first slave fort, Sao Jorge de Mina, was built on the Gold Coast in 1482.

Manner of Dispersal

The chains of the black captivity by the Europeans were forged in Africa. Prince, and peasants, merchants and agriculturists, warriors and priests were swept up into the vortex of Atlantic Slave Trade and funneled into the
sugar fields, the swampy rice lands and the tobacco plantation of the New World.

The process of enslavement was almost unbelievably painful and bewildering for the Africans. They were completely cut off from their native lands. They were frightened by artifacts of the Whiteman’s civilization and terrified by his cruelty until they learnt that they were only expected to work for him as they had been accustomed to doing in their native lands. Indeed, some were so morose that they committed suicide.

At the captive of Africans for dispersal, they were tied together by a rope and then marched hundreds of miles while suffering from thirst, hunger and exhaustion. Many died along the way, while some others emaciated and weak to reach the coast.

These African were shackled together on bare wooden boards in the hold and packed so tightly that they could not sit up rightly. During the dreaded mid passage, these Africans were let out of the hold twice daily for meals and exercise. The women and children were often permitted to spend a great deal of time on deck.

Proponents of African Diaspora have accepted that the mass movement of able bodied Africans into the new World was through force, warfare, raids and even kidnapping. The narrative of Victor of the export business such as Alaudah Equiano showed unmistakably the qualitative importance of forceful captive as a course of slave supply.

In counting the figures involved in this forceful “Scattering” it may seem either unknown or well enough known. Curtin estimated the range as to between 15-25 million Africans landed in the new world.

The blackman’s dilemma in the new world was a process of acculturation. There was a tensed master – servant relationship. There was also a synthesis of European-African cultures.

In the course of acculturation, the Africans made Europeans serve African functions. For example, most Africans believed in a creator or the all powerful God who one addresses directly through prayers, sacrifices, rituals, songs and dances. At the same time, they had panoply of lesser gods each of who governed one aspect of their life.

Christian activities were so similar to African religion. It was easy for the each African slave to incorporate them with their traditional practices and beliefs. For example, in America, Jehovah replaced the creator and Jesus, the Holy Ghost and the saints replaced the lesser gods. The Africans preserved many of their ceremonies in the conventional Christian rituals and ceremonies. After a few generations the slave forgot the African deities represented by the Judeo-Christian gods.
African music, language and funeral rites were clear areas of instance that remained in the African culture. But several generations most of this culture element had to disappear of language.

**Circumstances in which the Dispersal has left victims**

The horror and trauma of the dark dungeons and Ultimate Journey of no return across the middle passage is sometime beyond imagination. Africans have turned to have lose of memory of this gruesome forceful ejection so as to protect the psyche against possible disintegration. Be that as it may, it is suffice to say that the circumstances of the African in the Diaspora have left the victims with a disastrous consequence that is more than footnote in history. In remembering the middle passage therefore, deep questions and painful memories linger.

There was depopulation, decay in agriculture and general civilization and insecurity. Many villages and generations have ceased to exist. There was societal brutalization which greatly affected the people’s psychology. Incidence of sleeping sickness as a result of the prevalence of Tsetse fly was rampant. This greatly affected the livestock with its attendant effect on the level of the people’s nutrition.

Remarkably, the product of this rapacious activity was the ‘creation’ of Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Liberia. These were practical measures undertaken by the British and American philanthropists to settle the emancipated slaves following Lord Mansfield judgment of 1772 abolishing slave trade. Thenceforth, European civilization began to spread tentacles to Africa.

**Pan Africanism**

It is against the background of pain, chaos, dismemberment and sterility of the Africans that brought to bear, the driving force of Pan Africanism or Black internationalism. Indeed, there are bridges to build. There are wounds to heal. There are powerful usurper gods to depose. The works of the great pan Africanist scholars such as Blyden, Dubois, Garvey, Padmore and Nkrumah in the development of Pan Africanist ideas offers a sound understanding of the struggle.

Pan Africaism has frequently taken the form of specific local struggles against racial discrimination, oppression and material deprivation. Beyond this, pan Africanism has established Africa as the homeland of Africans and persons of African extraction, rehabilitate Africa’s past, inculcate pride in African culture and ensured hope for a united and glorious future Africa.

For the benefit of this work, I shall dwell on three major cases. Dubois, Nkrumah, and Garvey.

**Dubois**
He is the father of Pan Africanism. He was scholarly in the areas of history, economics, sociology, political science, folklore etc. he formed National Association For The Advancement of the Coloured People (NAACP). He fought against legalized segregation, terrorism etc. To Dubois, not all blacks are destined to be craftsmen, artisan, porters etc but are also destined to be lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, etc. He believed that no economic emancipation of the people can take place without political rights. Hence, he struggled for the emancipation of the down trodden black race. He hinged the practicability of Pan Africanism on the basis of national self – determination, individual freedom and democratic socialism. The slogan “Back to Africa” to Dubois did not mean transporting American Negroes back to Africa but asking for certain redresses and conferment of fundamental human rights.

Nkrumah

Nkrumah moved modern Pan Africanism from diaspora back to the homeland. He emerged out of the Manchester Pan African congress of 1945 to carry the struggle to colonial Africa. His success in organizing and leading the Gold Coast to independence through the convention peoples party (CPP) had ramifications all over the black world. Ghana’s independence played inspiring role in the new Black movement in the United States. Ghana became the ‘Mecca’ of the Pan African world. Nkrumah had unshakable commitment to the liberation of the African continent. His support for liberation movements across Africa led many colonies to attain self- rule.

Garvey

Marcus Garvey brought Pan African ideal from the high – powered level of intellectual and political discourse to the level of mass organization. He was fired by a determination to lead his people out of bondage back to the African homeland. Garvey founded the universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The movement gathered momentum that within few years it had branches worldwide. His symbolic Black Star line has survived in both the national shipping line and national flag of Ghana.

His slogans were a manifestation of his political philosophy. Such slogans as “Africa for Africans”; “Ethiopia awake”; “Back to Africa” and “Black Star Line” were invented by Garvey. He saw the indignity suffered by the Africans dispersed into the New world, hence he preached for their return or evacuation to Africa where he felt they would be better treated amidst their own people, he said: “for East or West, home is the best”.

Conclusion

The long period of dispersion of Africans in the Diaspora undermined all elements of civilization and growth in Africa. The entire Africa was obliterated with the traffic in human beings. Within this period, the area was desolate, chaotic, and regarded as instruments of service to the Europeans.
The development of Pan Africanism arose to redress oppression, dehumanization and all other obnoxious acts committed against the Black race. Despite various attempts at repositioning Africa and its people, deep rooted contemptuous prejudices which are likely to die hard has established in the minds of Africans.

Questions

1. Assess the circumstances of the victims of overseas slave trade in the 19th century.
2. The process of dispersing Africans in the Diaspora was sometimes unbelievably painful and bewildering. Do you agree?
3. Is it true that rehabilitation of African past was the major concern of Pan Africanism?
4. “East or West, home is the best”. Expatriate?
5. What were the major contributions of the Africans in the New World?

References

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3. Harris, Diasporan Studies and Pan Africanism, 1982