

PAN AFRICAN FILM FEST 2017 REPORT:
**THE ANGST OF PAN AFRICANISM
IN THE WORLDWIDE STRUGGLE
FOR BLACK LIBERATION**

By Earnest McBride
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Senegalese Director Ousmane William Mbaye, Producer Laurance Abati and interpreter/businessman Ben Niang after the presentation of the “Kemtiyu: Cheikh Anta Diop” film.

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois discerned that a “two-ness,” a “double consciousness” held sway in the souls of black folk, not only in the USA, but worldwide. This contradiction of always having to look at oneself through the eyes of others on the one hand and “longing to attain self-conscious manhood” on the other was the plight of nearly all “colored” and colonized peoples.

This insight, along with the looming issue of race as the dominant issue of the 20th Century needed to be addressed globally. After a series of conferences staged in major capitals around the world, the Pan African Movement was born, officially in 1897.

Thanks to a number of new historical narratives and documentary films screened at the Pan African Film Festival 2017 in Los Angeles Feb. 9-20, a very clear picture of how the black world of today has grown out of the great work of these internationalist thinkers emerged.

Long before there was a Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the idea of a united front of people of African descent liberating themselves from the control of a dominant white minority had become a fixture---not a dream but a real possibility---in the minds of emerging thinkers in Africa, Asia and throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. They named their group The African Association, founded in 1897 in London.

The initial leadership came from the nation of Trinidad with the London-educated lawyer Henry Sylvester Williams, who wrote the group's first political manifesto, as the chairman. It was DuBois, however, who played the biggest role in making the Pan African program a successful and well-respected movement among black intellectuals and statesmen according to another Trinidadian, writer C. L.R. James'

Once again, the two-ness, the double consciousness emerged. Should the AA members embrace the Haitian Revolution or should they advocate following the non-aggressive, strictly Christian path established by Bishop Wilberforce and the American Missionary Association? The working plan of the African Association was to unabashedly embrace Toussiant L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution as the model of black liberation, but at the same time they showed respect for the white ministers and women who were developing schools and colleges in the American South and in select African nations. They remained critical, however, of the white educators who sought only to perpetuate the black race as hewers of wood and incapable of abstract thought.

In September 1897, Williams established the African Association (AA) to "encourage a feeling of unity and facilitate friendly intercourse among Africans," and "promote and protect the interests of all subjects claiming African descent, wholly or in part, in British Colonies and other places, especially in Africa."

In 1900, however, the name and context of the organization changed, although the spirit of doing something right for a rather bad situation. The first Pan African Conference was held in London and at that gathering the AA changed its name to Pan African Association with the plan of meeting every two years.

The concern for establishing a course on Black History and fact-based sociological studies spurred many of the scholars at the 1900 London meeting to set up research centers and printing presses to publish their own writings.

Minkah Makalani of Rutgers University writes: "The spirit of the Pan-African Conference and the Pan-African Association would continue in various parts of the African Diaspora. John E. Bruce and the Puerto-Rican Arturo Schomburg, drawing on their experiences in Alexander Crummell's American Negro Academy, established in Harlem the Negro Society for Historical Research, which included Africans and blacks in the Americas. Alongside W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke, and the Panamanian Marie Du Chatellier, members included Edward Wilmot Blyden from the Virgin Islands, the lawyer Casely-Hayford from the Gold Coast (Ghana), and the Sudano-Egyptian Dusé Mohamed Ali. Later Ali and Joseph Casely-Hayford launched *The African Times and Orient Review* in 1912. The ATOR had a six-year run and circulated in the United States, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, Europe, and India."

Despite such stellar support from rising stars of the movement, the Pan African Association nevertheless failed to live up to its expectations. Once Henry Sylvester Williams returned to Trinidad, the PAA lay dormant, with no strong leadership to sustain it.

C.L.R. James says: “He (DuBois) is the person who did it; started it in every way, did the historical writings, organized to suit, and organized Pan-African conference after Pan-African conference.

The Pan African Movement has been falsely attributed to Marcus Garvey. The plan for a politically astute black international organization had been developed before Garvey reached his teen age years in Jamaica. Yet, when Garvey formed the United Negro Improvement Association in Kingston in 1914, his call for “Africa for Africans at a home and abroad” struck a chord in the hearts and minds of blacks of all stations of life worldwide.

With more than a thousand branches in 40 countries, the UNIA organized a month-long International Conventions of the Negro Peoples of the World in August, 1920. At this convention, Garvey was named Provisional President of Africa and drew the ire of many of the Pan African Association leaders. Even the editor of Garvey’s publication Black World called the election a farce and suggested that the people of the various African nations would most likely want to elect their own president.

A new coalition of Pan Africanists inspired by W. E. B. DuBois emerged as Garvey’s appeal spread. Once again they set out with a modified plan dedicated to African self-determination but cautiously optimistic about the possibility of freedom from colonial dominance. They confronted the League of Nations at the Berlin Peace Conference in 1919. Still they were tentative in what they proposed for emerging African nations. The resolution called on the League of Nations to establish rules and codes for governing African colonial subjects.

And now under DuBois’ leadership, the Second Pan African Conference of 1920 was held in three different cities---Paris, London and Brussels ---the new membership included George Padmore, Amy Ashwood Garvey, the former wife of Garvey, who divorced her after one year to marry Amy Jacques Garvey.

Padmore, a former student at Howard University resigned from the Communist Party in 1935 and established the International African Service Bureau, that included Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, I. T. A. Wallace Johnson of Sierra Leone, Mrs. Garvey and C. L. R. James. This group made a final break with its relationship to Marcus Garvey when it became known that Garvey supported the invasion of Italy in Ethiopia in 1935, presumably striking a blow against French and British Imperialism. Garvey lost even more tentative supporters when he entered negotiations with the Ku Klux Klan to get funds to relocate black Americans to Africa. The IASB sponsored James great study of the Haitian Revolution, “The Black Jacobins,” the story of Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution.

The lives of C. L. R. James and Cheikh Anta Diop captured on film and screened at PAFF showed the increasing relationships between blacks in American, the Caribbean and Africa. The liberating violence of the Haitian Revolution under the leadership of Toussaint L’Ouverture and Jean Jacques Dessalines became a more visible thread that wove through and guided the spirits of the true Pan Africanists who were on the threshold of liberation, they argued.

According to Minkah Makalani of Rutgers University, after the Egyptian military coup in 1952 and the deposing of King Farouk and a land reform that benefited peasant farmers the most, Nasser’s Egypt, became the centerpiece of liberation movements all over Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The story is extremely well delineated in the documentary by director Michal Goldman, “Nasser’s Republic: The Making of Modern Egypt.”

After the Egyptian military coup in 1952 and the deposing of King Farouk and land reform that benefited peasant farmers the most, Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt became the centerpiece of liberation movements all over Africa, Asia and the Middle. The story is extremely well delineated in the documentary by director Michal Goldman, "Nasser's Republic: The Making of Modern Egypt." When the Nasserite revolution occurred in 1952, only one other African country retained its independence. That was Ethiopia, a nation that proudly says that it had never been subjugated to colonial domination.

The deposing of the wealthiest class through the criminal courts, the opening of free public schools across the nation, and the building of the Aswan High Dam after 1956, were but small achievements in the eyes of the Egyptian people and Third World revolutionaries everywhere compared to the seizure of the Suez Canal from Britain and the expulsion of Britain, France and Israel after their seizure of Egypt's key land resources in 1956. Nasser was hailed as the greatest hero that the oppressed people of the world had ever had. In combination with the diligent efforts of the men and women who built the Pan African Movement, Nasser led the way to bringing Third World Nations into a powerful Non-aligned coalition during the Cold War that was seething between the Soviet Union and the white western countries. Besides bringing Syria and Yemen into a United Arab Republic that lasted only a few years, Nasser was also the most powerful figure in the push for a United States of Africa. This union, however, did not get too far, settling for a looser arrangement called the Organization of African States, which has continued to exist. And Nasser, after losing most of his army and the Sinai desert after the Israeli assault in 1967, died of a heart attack in 1968 while negotiating a peace treaty between Jordan and the disgruntled Palestinian refugees forced to encamp there.

Diop's life's work (1923-1986) was captured in the documentary "Kemtiyu: Cheikh Anta," by Senegalese director Ousmane William Mbaye. Mbaye makes it very clear that without the scientific proficiency and intellectual depth of Diop, Egypt today would not be considered an African Nation, and ancient Egypt would have continued to have been defined as a "white" nation by white supremacist historians and archaeologists.

Diop whose best-known work is "The African Origin of Civilization," defended his thesis of a Black Egypt in vying for his PhD at the University of Paris, the Sorbonne, and passed with flying colors. His credentials as an anthropologist, historian, and physicist are beyond question. But it was his communications with black students and scholars around the world that gave his studies their greatest importance.

"Thanks to the publication 'Presence Africaine,' a magazine that appealed to all things African and had widespread support among the thousands of black students in Paris and other parts of France. This publication, founded in 1952, was responsible for the presentation of the great early works of Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon and Cheikh Anta Diop. The Negritude Movement came through this publication. And the seminal works of Diop that redefined all of Africa as a common unit came through Presence Africaine."

Despite the great praise and great support Diop received from young Africans and black people of the diaspora, he was prevented from teaching his new discoveries at the University that bears his name today. President Senghor, the co-founder of the Negritude, but a loyal devotee to the French nation, set Diop up in a research lab at the university, but because of the stringent rules governing professorships in the French-run academies, Diop could only share his work with other scholars and had only one assistant working with him at the lab.

In 1966, Diop and W. E. B. DuBois (deceased on the day of the March on Washington in 1963) were honored at the World Black Festival of Arts and Culture as “the writers who had exerted the greatest influence on African people in the Twentieth Century.

Diop’s work was an essential part of the core curriculum that was about to emerge as Black Studies at colleges and universities all over the USA and around the world. He died in 1986, one year after visiting Atlanta’s Morehouse College for a series of lectures. His legacy is enshrined at Morehouse along with the many other black scholars whose work brought pride and dignity---and scientific knowledge---into the lives of black people the world over.

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