

Emancipation and Epistemological Questions By [Horace G. Campbell](#) 12 July 2007
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Introduction

Pan Africanism arose as a philosophy to restore the humanity and dignity of the African person and indeed all humans. The concept of dignity and humanity has gone through many iterations from the period of enslavement to the period of colonialism, segregation and Jim Crow, the periods of apartheid and neo-colonialism to the current period of the HIV-AIDS pandemic when corporations have given themselves the right to patent life forms. There are two very basic and simple propositions.

The first is the idea that the African person is respected as a human being. "Dignity in humans involves the earning or the expectation of personal respect or of esteem." The second proposition is that Africans are human beings who think and have a right to live on the planet earth. In the twenty first century, a human being is one who is defined in biological and spiritual terms and is different from cyborgs and robots (mechanical objects).

African peoples, especially those in the West, are particularly sensitive to the mechanical conceptions of humans from the period of the transatlantic Slave Trade to the present. In the era of clones, cyborgs, robotics, artificial intelligence and genetic engineering the question of what or who is a human and the dignity of the human person has been reopened.

Pan Africanists in the twenty first century continue to confront old questions of the hierarchy of humans that became embedded in the Anglo American thought through the period of the slave trade as well as the new theories dealing with potential transhumans.

The bio-political questions that are arising in this century of revolutionary technologies challenges all of humanity, but more so the African and Indigenous persons who have been threatened with genocidal violence in past periods of 'scientific' advancements in capitalist societies. In this century, the conceptual skills along with the creative spirit and cultures of African peoples remain one of the frontline weapons against the attempts of capitalism to dehumanize and to turn certain humans into mere body parts providing needed tissues and organs for the rich. As some scientists eagerly work towards the era of singularity (merging humans with artificial intelligence) the old questions of access to health care for all is now joined with the burning question of saving the planet earth and reversing the global warming that threatens to envelop life as we know it now.

It is the proposition of this presentation that we are living in a revolutionary period where the objective conditions are ripe for serious transformation. The challenge lay in the ideas and organization necessary to mobilize human beings to intervene politically to change the mode of human economic organization. In the absence of a clear ideology and organization the neo-conservatives at the helm of the world economy are pushing humanity deeper into the era of counter revolution. This counter revolution is being driven by ideas of neo-liberalism. However, the challenges of global warming, warfare and destruction expose the reality that the era of counter revolution is sharpening the need for an alternative to the old ideas of revolution.

Hurricanes, floods, and the pollution of the natural environment reinforce institutionalized racism and the social organization of society. New eugenic theories on right breed of humans are trumpeted while the World Trade Organization proclaims notions of intellectual property rights. At the same time a new brand of piracy -labelled biopiracy- is unleashed in order to seize the last genetic materials of the planet. All these forms of oppression and exploitation are legitimized with ideas of liberalization and freedom as the US capitalists jostle to dominate the planet from space. These challenges in the era of new potentialities for breaking the old backbreaking toiling of humans are linked to the old challenges of exploitation, sexism, patriarchy and heterosexism. Genocidal violence, warfare, economic terrorism, obscene fundamentalism and the challenges of the racialized planet have given new significance to the philosophy of Pan Africanism moving the concerns from the era of

the Civil Rights movement and unity of states to the question of the emancipation of human beings.

Emancipation and emancipatory ideas have to be redefined at every stage of the Pan African movement in so far as the politics of Pan Africanism has undergone changes over time. It was poignant that at the very moment when Pan Africanists should have been celebrating the victory over apartheid in April 1994, the fastest genocide in history unfolded in Rwanda challenging the basic Pan African creed: 'that the African in one part of the world is responsible for the condition of his brother and sister in other parts of the world.' This genocide in Rwanda, violent contestations for power all across the continent (the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Ivory Coast, Chad,) and crimes against humanity in Sudan along with the crude materialism of neo-liberal globalization has awakened new interest in the ideas and philosophies of the revolutionary traditions of the black liberation struggles. From the period of the Haitian Revolution through to the Bolivarian revolution of the 21st century, the Pan African movement has been linked to the ideas and practices of revolutionary thought and practice.

The ideas and philosophies of Pan Africanism are sometimes considered a unitary phenomenon but Africans in various parts of the world reflect and write about Pan Africanism in many different ways. In short, there is no one definition of what constitutes revolutionary Pan Africanism. What is, however, important is for us to grasp the emancipatory traditions within the Pan African movement and those thinkers who have developed a level of theoretical clarification of what it means to be a free human, that is a human being freed from all forms of oppression.

Philosophically a new cadre of intellectuals have been interrogating the philosophy of Pan Africanism and its importance to the working peoples. Most importantly, the progressive men and women of the continent have exposed the neo-colonial leaders at home and abroad. Thus far, in the written versions of African liberation, the centrality of African women have been in the main unrecorded in the dominant discourses on Pan Africanism. In the words of one activist, 'women did not write books, but wrote history.' Radical African feminists are not only calling for liberation and revolution but a redefinition of the past in order to prepare for a different future. These Pan African feminists draw inspiration from not simply the struggles of great women, but from the day to day struggles for life itself. It is from these struggles where the new theories of Pan Africanism emanate. In the words of Barbara Christian, 'people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic.' Harriet Tubman was one of those ancestors who wrote their theory by their political practice. This was the theory of self organization, self-liberation and self emancipation. In the twenty first century there are new scholars and thinkers who are not shy to retreat from the abstract positivism of 'the scientific method' but to link to the spiritual essence of African men and women.

At the end of the 20th Century, Phillippe Wamba's book on Kinship moved the discussion from the level of politics of movements, governments and great individuals to the question of the lived experiences of Africans at home and abroad. In this way, Philippe Wamba was able to represent Pan Africanism both at the theoretical and intellectual discourses and at the level of struggles of African peoples.

Drawing inspiration from his own transnational family from the USA and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the experiences of young African immigrants such as Amadou Diallo and the struggles against police brutality. Wamba was using an idea of Kinship which goes beyond the traditional biological kinship to a cultural concept of Kinship which echoed from Cheikh Anta Diop's view of the Cultural Unity of Africa.

Diop's conception of the cultural unity of Africa provided a profound starting point for the analysis of Pan Africanism in the 21st century. This is for a number of reasons.

Firstly, Diop refused to accept the divisions in Africa that has arisen from centuries of invasions. Hence, for Diop the idea of unity does not accept the divisions between sub-Saharan and North Africa.

Secondly, for Diop, the cultural unity of Africa was based on the importance of the historical unity, the psychological and linguistic unity of Africa.

Thirdly, this cultural unity transcended the artificial construction of states and nations that arose as a result of the imperialist partitioning of Africa at the Berlin Conference.

Hence, the goals of Pan Africanism were to be based on a federated state that returned to the principles of matriarchy and the centrality of the woman in the public life of Africa. This centrality was to be addressed through a new and novel form of bicameralism in Africa.

For Diop, African Unity had to be built on the independence and autonomy of African women and his novel form of bicameralism was articulated in his book, *Black Africa: The Economic and Cultural basis for a federated State*.

Fourthly, and very importantly, Diop did not believe in the Pan Africanism based on racial pigmentation. In his own domestic life he transcended these divisions between blackness and whiteness. Diop had not only laid out the ideas for continental African Unity, but also the ideas for a planetary civilization. In this way, Diop moved the idea of Pan Africanism beyond that of black people to the level of planetary unity of all peoples. Diop was also breaking the binary divisions between Europe and Africa in order to place the debate on Pan Africanism in a wider field.