

# Divided PANAFRICANISM over unity

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by Heather Green

In the tumultuous independence struggles in Africa during the 1950s and 60s, and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, it was the universal opposition of Africans to their oppression that brought about the idea of Pan-African solidarity.

On October 12 some 80 people gathered at the University of Toronto for an all-day conference on Panafricanism today. The event, organized by the Forum for African Students in Toronto, offered a variety of approaches to the idea of unity between Africans and people of African descent in the diaspora.

Aside from the traditional political and economic debates, an impressive panel of 11 speakers presented alternative feminist, religious, intellectual and community perspectives amid the call for a new Panafricanist ideology.

The speakers included academics from Africa, the Caribbean and North America. While some spoke specifically about their part of the globe, one factor was common: the continuing systemic oppression of African peoples around the world.

Professor Fred Case of the University of Toronto has remained in tune to Panafricanist trends, and he updated us on one of the most recent Panafrican plans of action: the call for an exclusively Black African unity south of the Sahara.

Case warned against the divisiveness of excluding North Africans (including Arabs and other Black Africans) from this unity, and noted that this call comes mainly from the Paris-based African community.

This division among Panafricanists gives one an idea of just how ineffective their efforts have been in uniting Africans. And when one is aware of the diversity of methods used to marginalize a variety of African peoples, each with its own history, one is pessimistic of the possibility of finding Panafricanist solutions that are universal to all.

This pessimism was reinforced as I listened to each speaker give a different account of the plight of Africans in this age and offer solutions (sometimes). York's Charles Simon opened with an example of past African achievements in his talk on the bloody anti-Portuguese struggle in Guinea-Bissau. Yet where was the relevance to Panafricanism today?

Liberian Geepe Nah Tiepoh, also from York, discussed the more burning issue of total foreign domination in African economies. Geepe believes in the necessity of popular struggles for control over production and economies, and calls for the dismantling of the "international division of labour," which puts Africans at the bottom.

American professor Clarence Munford, from the University of Guelph, pulled no punches in his attack on White European beliefs and civilization when he concluded that "racism in all its guises remains the West's only authentic ideology."

At its worst, unrealistic at its best, and diametrically opposed to the traditional African belief that "the land is life, the means of continuity of our people, and a hope for our people."

These words of elders in Madagascar were delivered in Emmanuel Tehindrazanarivo's talk on traditional African religion. While the simplicity of this context has been surpassed by the complexities of foreign domination, some of the elders' other beliefs ring true for us today: we must know our history in order to understand our present and plan for our future.

Wynter believes that institutionalized in today's systems of knowledge — in keeping with Columbus' new order — is the notion

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that the African is defined as "other" or "alter." In other words, where White and European are seen as the norm, good and right, Black and African are seen as "other," evil and wrong.

While Wynter believes that such inherently racist ideas are inseparable from everyday social realities, she suggests that Panafricanists must change this model of being "other" by helping create a "new humanist intellectual order for the twenty-first century," in which Africans are recognized as humans on par with any other.

The Stanford University professor received a standing ovation for her exhilarating speech which, however, Ghanaian student Eme Adibe called "a romantic trip to epistemology." Adibe's remark underlined the less glamorous theme of responsibility for change, and the necessity for plausible solutions which were virtually absent in Wynter's presentation.

More tangible suggestions were put forth by professor Molar Ogundipe-Leslie in her look at "Feminism in an African context." Ogundipe-Leslie urged African men (and women) to give women space for expression, to understand and admit their subordination and to incorporate the feminist struggle into the fight against racist oppression. "There can be no priorities which exclude women," she explained.

Similarly, professor Keren Brathwaite urged African parents to understand their children's frustrations with racism. "Since education either nurtures, wounds or negates one's being," she said, "our involvement in their education is a responsibility, and is essential to our Panafricanism."

Finally, Panafricanist intellectuals were challenged to provide guidance and criticism for those working for grass-roots change. "Conferences must lead to plans of action," said a fiery Atwatu Khenti in the last speech of the day, "and we Africans have a lot of conferences."

*"We must know our history in order to understand our present and plan for our future."*

With a preacher-like voice, Munford pitted Black against White as he touched on the "350-year Atlantic slave trade, the imperialist partition of Africa and rape of its resources" and the estimated "97 trillion dollar" (calculated, with interest, in today's currency) compensation owed to African-Americans for their contribution to building the New World and the U.S., the most powerful country in the world today.

Munford fervently suggested that in order to join the "world club" of powers which he sees as "for whites only," African leaders must seize control of more contemporary — and even nuclear — weapons.

But this solution is ridiculously destruc-

Yet knowledge constitutes only the first half of a two-part process in which awareness plus action will bring change. Without action, knowledge remains just a pretty-sounding theory, as was demonstrated by guest speaker Sylvia Wynter.

Showing an extensive knowledge of her past, the African-Jamaican Wynter explained how Columbus' "discovery" of the "New World" challenged the Pope, the Monarchs, Aristotle's notion of knowledge and the belief that the earth was flat and ended off the shores of Europe. This was also the advent of a new intellectual order of knowledge, class hierarchies, materialism and racism.



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