

Garvey's "UNIA" Association and Back-to-Africa Project

Marcus Garvey (1887- 1940) was born in Jamaica in the British West Indies. Growing up with white children in his neighbourhood, he learned his first lessons "in race distinction" which formed him and his later goals and aspirations. He said: "We romped and were happy playmates together. To me, there was no difference between white and black. We were (...) innocent fools who never dreamed of a race feeling and problem." Nevertheless, when they reached teenage, the white parents interrupted their friendships telling their children to "never (...) get in touch with (him, again, for he was) a 'nigger'". As a young man, Garvey realized: "My school mates (...) did not know or remember me anymore. (...So) I had to make a fight for a place in the world."¹ He started to work as a journalist and created a newspaper, which he called "The Watchman". In 1910, Garvey set out on a journey through Central America, where he began writing two more journals. He was inspired when watching black workers harvesting plantations, loading ships, and building the Panama Canal. They were the power behind the economy, but in their isolation from each other; powerless. So Garvey started dreaming of a Black "Empire" based in the West Indies. Two years later, he went to London to learn more about life and work conditions of Blacks in the Diaspora. He got a clerk's position at the freshly founded newspaper "The African Times and Orient Review"(ATOR). Its editor, the Sudanese- Egyptian Duse Muhammad Ali (1866- 1945) was counted one of the leading pan- Africanists of the period and became an important mentor, to him. At this special working place, Garvey had the opportunity to read articles by and about leading Black pioneers of social equality.² Duse introduced him to Casely Hayford. Through these intensive encounters, Garvey's above-mentioned vision was transformed to that of a worldwide movement seeking to establish an "African Empire". He aimed to unify all Blacks across the globe and be their leader. He wrote: „I asked (myself): 'Where is the Black man's government? Where is his king and his kingdom, (...) his president, (...) country, (...) ambassador, (...) army, (...) navy; his men of big affairs?' I could not find them, and then I declared: 'I will help to make them'."³

In 1914 shortly before the beginning of the First World War, Garvey sailed back home. In the same year together with his later wife Amy Ashwood (1897- 1969), he established the "Universal Negro Improvement Association" (UNIA). Their motto was:

¹ Marcus Garvey, "A Journey of Self-Discovery", *Current History Magazine* (1923), quoted in *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa*, ed. John Henrik Clark (NY: Vintage Books, 1974), 71-73.

² "Bruce to Major Walter H. Loving", *The Marcus Garvey Papers* Vol. I, ed. Robert Hill, (1919): 349351.

³ Amy Jaques Garvey, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey or Africa for the Africans*, 2nd Ed. (London/ GB: Frank Cass & Co. LTD, 1983), 126.

“One God, One Aim, One Destiny”. Unfortunately, the work did not succeed in Jamaica, so Garvey went to the States where his ideas found new life and the organization work could be continued. Garvey's arrival in the United States coincided with the process of the “New Negro Movement” during and after the war: Thousands of black Southerners were migrating to Northern cities; black soldiers who had fought in Europe defending democracy, had experienced equal rights and been promised civil rights after their return. When these were neglected and instead, a new post-war racism made their life harder than before, an explosion in race pride and racial consciousness fuelled a political and cultural revival in Black America. Garvey's racial temperament and organizational skills became a perfect match for these forces, changing the landscape of African America. He propagated a message of racial salvation to the masses: “I am the equal of any white man; I want you to feel the same way (...) No more fear, no more cringing, no more sycophantic begging and pleading (...) We are demanding that freedom that Victoria of England never gave; that liberty that Lincoln never meant, that freedom, that liberty that will see us men among men, that will make us a great and powerful people.”⁴ When Garvey personally met W.E.B. DuBois (1868- 1963), he tried to convince him of his ideas. Unfortunately, this did not only fail, but within three years, they became ideological adversaries and arch rivals for the leadership of Black America. Instead of DuBois, the female activist Ida B. Wells (-Barnett; 1862- 1931) started assisting and sponsoring Garvey's ambitions. He set out for a year-long tour of 38 states. He got a first-hand look at the contradiction of race in America: the stunning potential of the most affluent Black population in the world, alongside the degradation of the racist “Jim Crow”- era and the horrors of lynching.

In 1917, Garvey opened the first American division of the UNIA. Through this organization, he was able to win masses of Black Americans for his cause, which became a movement called “Garveynism”. Out of this, because of the anew-increasing injustice and racism in the land, the Back- to- Africa- movement was revived. Garvey's approach was to tell Black Americans that their history did not begin with slavery, but Africa's glorious past was also theirs and they could achieve great things together, again. This message was revolutionary giving people a new self-confidence, hope and a perspective. Besides the political goals, Garvey's meetings were whole family gatherings for days and took on a social- religious dimension. His Back- to- Africa- Project as branch of the UNIA included not only bringing Afro- Americans to Africa (Liberia), but also protecting Black people in the world, supporting their economical upraise, helping them increase

⁴ William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot- Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (NY: Atheneum, 1980), 210-217.

their education, further their political independence and strengthen the Black Christian churches. Another branch of UNIA was the “Negro Factories Corporation” which was founded in 1919. Garvey intended it to “build and operate factories in the big industrial centres of the United States, (...) the West Indies, and Africa to manufacture every marketable commodity.”⁵ The corporation had a chain of grocery stores, restaurants, a doll factory, laundries, a hotel and a printing press in Harlem. Its most extensive economic venture was the “Black Star (Steamship) Line” (BSL) which transported goods. Garvey was able to purchase a large auditorium in Harlem to serve as the headquarters for UNIA. This was called “Liberty Hall” and soon, Liberty Halls sprang up at many more places.

When in 1920, the UNIA held its first “International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World”, there were thousands of delegates from 25 countries from the American continent and different parts of Africa. They sang an international Black hymn, the “Universal Ethiopian Anthem”, which began: "Ethiopia, thou land of our fathers, Thou land where the gods loved to be, As storm cloud at night sudden gathers Our armies come rushing to thee (...)"⁶ Shortly before this highlight of Garvey’s fame and life work, there had been an attempt to kill him. During this time, he gave a rousing speech at Madison Square Garden, in which he proclaimed that after 500 years of oppression, Blacks were determined to suffer no more. Referring to the “Jim Crow”-era and new colonial entitlements of the European nations on African lands after the First World War, Garvey appealed that the Blacks should fight for their rights. The media as “dangerous” regarded the speech, but even though his words were fervent, he never intended to prepare for war. Still from this time on, American and European governments tried to prevent Garvey from achieving his political ambitions. The U.S. government considered him and the UNIA subversive and the European colonial powers saw him as a threat to their possessions. Garvey was never able to step his feet on his “dreamland”, his work in Liberia was sabotaged and he was refused visa. Even many of the African Americans whom he had tried to win for his ideas, began to organize a “Garvey Must Go” campaign under the leadership of his former supporter Randolph and his old rival DuBois. They opposed him because he advocated Black separatism while their goal was to integrate the Blacks into the existing American society. Through all these setbacks, Garvey’s work and that of the UNIA was radically affected. The BSL was experiencing grave financial problems. In 1922, Garvey was even arrested for several years under accusations of

⁵ Tony Martin, *Race First- The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport/ Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976) 13.

⁶ *Ibid*; p. 41.

financial fraud, which could not be proved right. His rival DuBois abused his desperate situation by trying to convince the U.S. Secretary of State to allow him to take over the Black Star Line.⁷ After his time in prison in 1927, Garvey went back to Jamaica where he received a hero's welcome. Still, his best times were over, by then. He never returned to the United States, again, and did not work with UNIA, any more. Instead, he travelled much in the Caribbean, South America and Europe, where he continued his pan- African activist work until his death in London.⁸

One cannot deny the importance of the Garveyism movement in the African American Community and the fact that the UNIA was almost a church for most people involved in it. They developed creeds of which some were a bit exaggerated in how they admired Garvey as their hero. Nevertheless, concerning their Black Christian orientation, these creeds really helped people overcome their inferiority complexes caused by White supremacy and the spiritual justification of the Slave Trade. They found their own way of worship and used their own religious symbols.⁹

The principle of race-pride in Garveyism as well as the search for autonomous Black institutions played an important role in the creation of the "African Orthodox Church". The UNIA never adopted any specific confession or religion to the exclusion of others (Garvey having declined invitations to make either Judaism or Islam the official religion of the UNIA), nor did Garvey found or participate in the AOC. However, it was allowed to use the medium of the UNIA's official organ, the "Negro World", to spread their news in the Caribbean, Central and South America, and the Gold Coast.

The Kenyan politician and first president Jomo Kenyatta (1891- 1978) related in 1921 that Kenyans "would gather round a reader of Garvey's newspaper (...) and listen to an article, two or three times." They would then go into the surrounding areas "carefully to repeat the whole, which they had memorized, to Africans hungry for some doctrine which lifted them from the servile consciousness in which (they) lived."¹⁰ Dr. Nkrumah acknowledged Garvey's influence as the most important during his years as a student in the U.S. He wrote: "I think that of all the literature that I studied, the book that did more than any other to fire my enthusiasm was the

⁷ Ibid., p.136.

⁸ Ibid., p.18.

⁹ George Alexander McGuire, *Universal Negro Catechism* (NY: Universal Negro Improvement Association, 1921), 2.3.

¹⁰ John White, *Black Leadership in American 1895-1968* (NY: Longman, 1978), 76. ⁹⁶ Kwame Nkrumah, *Autobiography* (NY: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1957), 45.

'Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey'".⁹⁶ Garvey was also credited to have said: "Look to Africa, where a Black King shall be crowned, for the Day of Deliverance is near." This phrase, which remains undocumented, gave birth to the entire Rastafarian religious system. In November 1930, Ras Tafari¹¹ was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia, receiving the title "Haile Selassie I" as well as other titles celebrating him as the Black redeemer.

¹¹ Lindsay A. Arscott, "Black Theology", *Evangelical Review of Theology* Vol. 10 (1986): 137. ⁹⁸ Randall K. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement- the Institutionalisation of a Black Civil Religion* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1978), 15.