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A Black Community Development Model: The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League 1917–1940

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A discussion of The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA & ACL) founded by Marcus Garvey in 1915 is presented. The organization provided social services for people of African ancestry in both the U.S. and other countries as well. An analysis of this organization occurs, citing the functions of subgroups like the Universal African Legions and the Universal African Motor Corps. This organization serves as a historic model for contemporary community development.

The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League was founded in 1915 in Jamaica, West Indies by Marcus Garvey. Garvey immigrated to Harlem, New York a year later, locating the UNIA and ACL headquarters in Liberty Hall. From the first branch in Harlem, over 1,000 branches of the UNIA were established throughout the U.S.A., Central and South America and the West Indies and Africa (Harris, 1978; Martin, 1976).

Many people are familiar with the Honorable Marcus Garvey, Garveyism, and the Garvey movement, yet few know of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the African Communities League (ACL). Discussions of this organization have generally been presented only as a means of explaining Garvey's philosophies and/or opinions (Crono, 1955; Garvey 1970; Nembhard, 1978). From the years of 1917 until 1940 the world, nonetheless, resounded with the ring of the name of this organization which Marcus Garvey hoped would be the instrument for people of African descent throughout the diaspora to gain their cultural, economic, political and social freedom (Garvey, 1923; Harris, 1978).

The purpose of this article is to analyze the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League as a Black organization existing in the Black community for the expressed benefit of the Black Community. In the instance of the UNIA, the Black community is defined as wherever people of African ancestry exist. A Black organization is defined as an organization established by, directed by, funded by, and staffed by Black people for the economic, psychological and social benefit of Black people. Emphasis is placed on the UNIA and ACL in the United States from the year of 1917 to 1940; because as Martin (1976) notes the organization was most successful in the United States during this time period.

The undergirding thesis is that the UNIA and ACL can be used as a model for social and economic development for people of African ancestry. Many of the methods, tactics and strategies advocated by such Black scholars as Haywood (1948), Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), Allen (1970) and Harris (1977) have their roots in the organizational structure, philosophy and ideology of the UNIA and ACL. An analysis of the UNIA and ACL and its programs would assist in building an organization and/or programs effective in meeting the social, psychological, economic, and spiritual needs of the Black Community in the last part of this century and into the 21st century.

Philosophy

Garveyism provided the philosophical underpinning for all the programs developed and implemented by the UNIA. Harris (1978) defined Garveyism as a philosophy and program for the emancipation of the Black Race and the redemption of Africa for the Africans, those on the continent and those displaced throughout the diaspora.

Garveyism as originally stated, contended that the Black people of the world had only progressed from chattel slavery to economic slavery; because they had no economic basis of power. Explicit in the philosophy was that Black people were not to blame God, but man's inhumanity to man for their oppressed plight. According to Crawford (1979) Garveyism stressed the need for Blacks, those of Negro blood and race (Garvey, 1923), to organize and work together as a group and not to depend

on any other group but "Negroes". The UNIA and the ACL emphasized unity, work, religion and especially Black property and business ownership. Furthermore, the UNIA and the ACL was the instrument through which Garvey visualized Black people throughout the world working toward the liberation of Africa and forming a Black worldwide nation. The essence of Garvey's philosophy was the creation of a nation.

Garveyism stressed the positive aspects of Blackness. It was concerned with fostering racial pride and awareness and advocated a belief in God with UNIA members living up to the highest moral standards. As the founder of Garveyism, Marcus Garvey was prophetic in teaching and propagandizing the inter-relationship between the liberation of Africa and the liberation of oppressed Blacks throughout the world.

Two slogans of the UNIA summarize Garveyism, "Africa for Africans" and the UNIA motto, "One aim, One God, One Destiny." UNIA philosophy emphasized the fact that no matter where a Black might live, they were still African.

Aims and Objectives

Information presented in this section on organizational structure has been abstracted from the *Constitution and Book of Laws Made for the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League Incorporated of the World*, effective July 1918 and amended August of 1920 and 1921.

The preamble of the UNIA describes the organization as

. . . a social, friendly, humanitarian, charitable, educational, institutional, constructive and expansive society founded by persons desiring to the utmost to work for the general uplift of the Negro peoples of the world (p. 1).

The official organ of the UNIA, entitled *Garvey's Voice* prominently displays the organization's motto, "One God, One Aim, One Destiny." (*Garvey's Voice*, Jan., 1979). The newspaper has carried several names since its inception including *Negro World* changed in 1933 to, *World Peace Echo* and later changed to *Garvey's Voice*.

Article I (p. 4) of the Constitution lists the objectives and aims of the UNIA and ACL.

There are ten objectives and aims of the UNIA and ACL:

1. Establish a Universal Confraternity among the race.
2. Promote the spirit of pride and love.
3. Reclaim the fallen.
4. To administer to and assist the needy.
5. To assist in civilizing the backward tribes of Africa.
6. To assist in the development of Independent Negro Nations and Communities.
7. To establish Commissionaries or Agencies in the principal countries and cities of the world for the representation and protection of all Negroes, irrespective of nationality.
8. To promote a conscientious spiritual worship among the native tribes of Africa; to establish universities, colleges, academies and schools for the racial education and culture of the people.
9. To conduct a world-wide commercial and industrial intercourse for the good of the people.
10. To work the better conditions in all Negro communities.

Membership and Dues

According to Article IX of the Constitution, all persons of Negro blood and African ancestry are regarded as ordinary members and entitled to consideration of the UNIA. Active members are defined as those who pay dues and they have first claim to considerations of the UNIA. Considerations included assistance in illness and financial depression.

Each active member was assessed twenty-five cents per month, one dollar each January, a ten cent death tax per month, a five cent tax to help pay a \$75.00 death benefit to the deceased person's family; in addition each active member was required to pay five dollars annually into the African Redemption Fund. All high officials, members of the parent body and local officials were required to subscribe to the Black Star Line Stock. No specific number of stocks were required to be purchased by the above name positions.

In addition to these dues and taxes, members of various organizations within the UNIA were required to pay minimal dues.

Draper (1969) contends that the UNIA appealed mainly to recently uprooted Negro migrants from Southern states and these recently arrived from the West Indies who were emotionally stirred by nationalism and emigration incantations. Closer analysis suggests that many Black, "well to do" and/or community leaders supported the UNIA. A number of Harlem Renaissance era figures supported, were connected with or were members of the UNIA.

Reformer and activist, A. Phillip Randolph, who later became an opponent of the UNIA, and anti-lynching crusader Ida Wells-Barnett were nominated to lobby on behalf of the UNIA at the Paris Peace Conference (Martin, 1976). Madame C.J. Walter, the wealthy cosmetic manufacturer, was also a known supporter of the UNIA (Martin, 1976). J.A. Rodgers, noted Afro-American historian, and Harlem Renaissance poet, Claude McKay wrote for *Negro World*. T. Thomas Fortune, veteran civil rights fighter and dean of Afro-American journalist, edited *Negro World* in his last years of life. William H. Ferris, M.A., Harvard and Yale universities also edited *Negro World*. (*Negro World*, September 12, 1921). Additionally, editions of *Negro World* are replete with the organization's association with various prominent Black Churches and church leadership, (*Negro World*, February 12, 1921) of the time.

Organizations within the UNIA

There were at least three organizations within the UNIA itself, (1) the Universal African Legions, (2) Universal African Black Cross Nurses and (3) the Universal African Motor Corps. Membership in the Universal African Legions was open to active members between the ages of 18–55 years of age in good health. The purpose was to teach these men military skills and discipline. The Legion was under the direct supervision of the Minister of the Legions. The sphinx was the symbol of the Legion. The Legion was an uniformed army with a military chain of command and stratification. The purpose of the Legion was to provide protection for the UNIA and the Black community against racist and unjust physical aggression. The Universal African Motor Corps was open to active members ages 15–45 and was to assist the Legion in the performance of their duties.

The Universal African Black Cross Nurses were to carry on a system of relief and to assist in mitigating the suffering caused by pestilence, famine, fire, floods and other great calamities. They were to care for the sick and engage in preventative medicine. The Universal African Black Cross Nurses issued pamphlets on safety and accident prevention. They instructed the public in sanitation and first aid. The organization was open to active female members ages 16–45. A central committee composed of the President General of the UNIA, a universal African Black Cross Nurse Directress and the Surgeon General, directed the function of this corps of nurses.

In order to provide a high level of training and direction to members of the nursing corps, the Surgeon General was required to be a bacteriologist and the Directress, a graduated nurse with three years of experience. A Black Latin Cross encircled by a red background in the center of a green field was the nurses corps emblem. Girls were prepared from the age of fourteen to join the nurses corps.

Educating and nurturing children was a core component of the UNIA. The constitution outlined specific programs, targeting children: teaching prayer, discipline, African history, as well as the UNIA and ACL's history and philosophy.

Funding

The UNIA and ACL was a self supporting organization; with the African Communities League being the arm under which the financial corporations operated. The League was designed to establish economic solvency and independence in the African Communities of the world (Harris, 1976).

A major funding aim was to build an economic base for the nation which the UNIA was attempting to establish (Garvey, 1966). Under the direction of the African Communities League, incorporated on July 31, 1918, as a business corporation, the Negro Factories Corporation was founded. The Negro Factories Corporation managed the UNIA's laundries, restaurants, a doll factory, tailoring and millinery establishments and a printing press (*New World*, February 12, 1921).

The African Communities League's greatest financial endeavor evolved around the Black Star Line Steamship

Corporation. Based on Martin (1976) and Nembhard (1978) the Black Star Line Steamship Corporation was incorporated in Delaware on June 27, 1919 with a capital stock of \$500,000. Shares had a par value of \$5.00 each and individuals could purchase a maximum of two hundred shares. The multiple purposes of the Line were to eliminate the racial discrimination suffered by Black passengers on white lines, and to provide jobs for Black seamen. The two most important needs which the UNIA leadership envisioned the Black Star Line fulfilling were to provide transportation for Negroes to return to Africa, and to act as a means of linking together the Black peoples of the world. African and West Indian merchants saw in it the hope of independence from racist white companies.

Within less than three months of incorporation the line had amassed enough money to purchase the *Yarmouth*, on September 17, 1919, at a cost of \$165,000. The *Yarmouth*, unofficially named the *Frederick Douglass*, sailed three voyages between New York, Cuba, Panama, the West Indies and Costa Rica, transporting hundreds of passengers and shiploads of cargo. A total of three more ships were purchased by the Black Star Line. But, due to poor management, lack of fiscal planning, graft, and sabotage at the hands of white crew members, this venture fell into bankruptcy.

Ironically, this venture was the largest and initially most successful. It had the potential to be a key mechanism in a worldwide Black nation. It was the key in the demise of the UNIA. By convicting Marcus Garvey of selling the Line's stock through the mail, the U.S. Government was able to incarcerate then deport Garvey back to Jamaica.

Leadership

Without a doubt Marcus Garvey was the unavowed head of the UNIA and ACL. He formulated its philosophy, directed its operations and was credited with operationalizing concepts of a world nation of Black People. Essentially, Garvey implemented a program for the self determination of Black people throughout the world. Crono (1955) describes Garvey as the "Black Moses," a short, chubby Black man who was charismatic in his leadership. Through that charisma, he organized four

million active UNIA members by 1921 (Negro World, February 26, 1921), providing leadership to the largest mass movement of Blacks in the world (Draper 1969).

Marcus Garvey, through the UNIA, garnered the voluntary support of Black people on a worldwide basis. Garvey's leadership can also be described as supportive, as defined by Hall (1972), utilizing socio-emotional appeals to his subordinates. An article addressing the post war (WWI) economic plight of the Negro people (Negro World, February 26, 1921) and his speech concerning the East St. Louis Riots delivered at Lafayette Hall in New York are excellent examples of his socio-emotional style in appealing to the UNIA membership.

Decline of UNIA and ACL

Martin (1976) discusses what he believes to be the key factors in the decline of the UNIA and ACL. The first is the economic depression of the thirties which diminished the financial support from organization's membership. Secondly, Garvey being deported, left the organization without its charismatic leadership. Yet, even in Garvey's absence, there was sufficient economic support and membership participation to hold the Eighth International Convention in Toronto, Canada in August of 1938.

Increasingly, financial troubles plagued the UNIA after the Black Star Line Steamship Corporation was forced to close its business doors. Membership eroded due to increasing fragmentation of UNIA members into splinter organizations such as the Peace Movement of Ethiopia. In-roads into the membership by Father Divine, the Black Muslims, and the Moorish Americans also contributed to its declining membership and influence in the Black Community.

Yet, the U.S. government might have been the single most significant factor in the decline of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. Martin (1976) links J. Edgar Hoover with the conspiracy to spy on the UNIA and to jail Marcus Garvey for mail fraud. Martin (1976) connects Tyler, Garvey's attempted assassin with the U.S. government and James E. Amos, an ex-bodyguard of former

President Theodore Roosevelt and at the time a black agent of the F.B.I. with spying on the UNIA.

Martin (1976) says the U.S. government's harassing of Garvey included trying to prevent him from entering the U.S. after a trip abroad. On two separate occasions while in Oakland and Los Angeles, California the police tried to prevent Garvey from addressing UNIA membership. The tactic was to destroy the UNIA by destroying its leadership. As if the U.S. government was not enough for the UNIA to struggle against, intellectual integrationists such as W.E.B. DuBois (*Crisis*, January 1921) and the NAACP were ardent opponents of the UNIA (*Crisis*, February, 1928). The UNIA was also assaulted by the Communists in its struggle to influence the development of a Black nation (Draper 1969; Harris, 1978; Brath; 1979).

*Contributions to Black Community
Development and Black Social Welfare*

Harris (1977) defines community development as the following:

Community development seeks to create a more unified community, a deeper spirit of civic pride and citizen initiative for the achievement of specific programs that are determined to be essential in order to effect needed improvements in the community. It seeks to help all citizens to gain a better understanding of each other to develop improved habits of sharing community responsibility and of working together for community wide goals. (p.15)

Without a doubt the UNIA and ACL fulfilled this definition, the philosophy, constitution and programs were all directed to this end. In fact, the UNIA and ACL present a model for community development in the Black Community. The organization addresses philosophically and programmatically the issues of consciousness raising and the need to instill a sense of racial pride through knowledge of one's heritage. The economic programs provided jobs, which provided an economic independence for the Black Community.

From a social welfare perspective the UNIA and ACL provided a social milieu conducive to the individual and familial development of Black people through establishing a system

of health and welfare services in an era in which the local and national systems neglected to provide these services for Black people.

Ironically, even though the UNIA and ACL declined rapidly after 1940, its legacy lived and provided a model both philosophically and pragmatically for the Black world community. The UNIA stressed the importance of liberation from oppression and in agreement with Allen (1970) developed a planned communal social system on a national scale with strong international connections. The influence of the UNIA and ACL can be observed today. The UNIA had a branch in South Africa and was associated with the African National Congress (Martin, 1976), the major indigenous freedom party in South Africa. African countries such as Kenya and Tanzania have gained their freedom since the inception of the UNIA and have adapted the colors of the UNIA's flag; red, black and green, and were probably influenced by the slogan of the UNIA; Africa for Africans (Martin, 1976).

Crawford (1979) contends that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Black Muslim's Nation of Islam, was once a member of the UNIA's Detroit chapter and obtained the fundamental philosophy, structure, programs and organizing strategies from this association. The Nation of Islam like the UNIA is based upon the development of high moral character and family unity, with an emphasis on economic control of the Black Community and like the UNIA, its leadership emerging from the indigenous people (Allen, 1990). Most notably the Nation of Islam developed programs to rehabilitate drug dealers, drug abusers, prostitutes and criminals through instilling racial and cultural pride and providing employment, almost identical to the UNIA's programs.

The UNIA offers a model for adolescent development. Male adolescents became members of the Universal African Legion where they were taught moral development and self discipline by the older men in the organization who acted as role models and mentors. They were apprenticed to the various businesses owned and operated by the UNIA, to learn a skill for self-sufficiency. Additionally, the young men were taught African history in order to instill racial pride and dignity. The same

process holds true for young women who participate in the Black Cross Nurses.

Implications for Social Work

Social work educators need to present the UNIA and ACL as an effective model of intervention for psycho-social and economic problems facing the Black community, such as crime, violence, teenage pregnancy and unemployment, as the United States moves into the 21st century. Practitioners should offer to work with the UNIA which is reemerging in Black communities throughout the United States. (S. Baye personal communication, April 20, 1993). Social work practitioners can offer technical knowledge and skills in group work, casework, community development and cultural competency.

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