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Race and Territory in the Pan-Africanist Thought of Kwame Nkrumah

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Abstract. This study examines the relationship between race and territory in Pan-Africanist thought, with a particular focus on the ideas of Kwame Nkrumah. It aims to clarify whether Pan-Africanism developed as a single evolving tradition or as distinct but overlapping frameworks shaped by different historical conditions. The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, relying on textual analysis of Nkrumah's major writings and speeches, alongside a critical engagement with existing scholarship on Pan-Africanism. The findings show that Pan-Africanism manifested in both racial and territorial forms. While its early development in the diaspora was grounded in racial solidarity and the struggle against discrimination, its later articulation in Africa responded to the demands of colonial rule, political independence, and state formation. Rather than representing a simple transition, these forms coexisted and addressed different concerns. Nkrumah's thought illustrates this dynamic, as he rejected racialism as a guiding principle while advancing a territorially grounded vision of African unity and political organization. The study contributes to ongoing debates by offering a clearer distinction between racial and territorial Pan-Africanism and by situating Nkrumah within this framework. It is relevant to scholarship on African political thought, decolonization, and the intellectual history of Pan-Africanism.

Keywords: Pan-Africanist thought, Kwame Nkrumah, race and territory, anti-racialism, continentalism, African unity, political organization

1. Introduction

Pan-Africanism, both as an intellectual tradition and a political movement, emerged as a response to the systemic racial discrimination experienced by people of African descent in the Americas and the Caribbean. In these societies, Black populations were marginalized and denied full recognition as individuals with rights, despite formal legal measures such as the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, European imperial expansion had extended these dynamics of subjugation to the African continent through colonization. Consequently, Pan-Africanism evolved into a broader movement aimed at resisting Black oppression globally and advancing the emancipation of African peoples. Over time, the movement underwent a significant transformation, shifting from a primarily racial framework to one increasingly defined by territorial and continental concerns (Browning & Oliveira, 2017; McEachrane, 2020). It thus became anchored in Africa, where it articulated demands for decolonization and political independence (Allen,1976). This transformation raises important conceptual questions regarding the nature and trajectory of Pan-Africanist thought. Specifically, it invites clarification of the distinction between "racial Pan-Africanism" and "territorial Pan-Africanism," as well as an examination of whether these orientations developed independently or represent phases within a continuous ideological evolution.

Within this discourse, Kwame Nkrumah occupies a central position. His political activities from the 1940s through Ghana's independence in 1957, and his subsequent efforts to promote the liberation of remaining colonized African territories and the political unification of the continent, underscore his enduring influence. In light of ongoing debates on race and territory in Pan-Africanist thought, a critical examination of Nkrumah's ideas is warranted, particularly given his association with the emergence of continentalism within the movement (Osemwengie & Omon, 2025). Key questions arise concerning the extent to which his early thought was grounded in racial consciousness, whether elements of territoriality were already present, and how these dimensions interacted over time. It is also necessary to determine the point at which his conception of Pan-Africanism assumed a distinctly continental orientation.

Addressing these issues requires a systematic analysis of Nkrumah's evolving ideological framework within

the broader context of Pan-African discourse. His advocacy of immediate continental unity, rather than gradual integration, distinguished him within the movement and reflected his conviction that political unity was essential to safeguarding African states from external domination. For Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism constituted fundamentally a political project through which self-governance, economic autonomy, and a unified African identity could be realized.

2. Competing Interpretations Between Race and Territory in the Pan-Africanist Discourse

Racial Pan-Africanism is most commonly associated with the struggle for the emancipation of people of African descent globally, particularly in the United States and the Caribbean. It developed largely within the diaspora, where Black intellectuals and activists confronted systems of racial exclusion and sought recognition, dignity, and inclusion within societies structured by white dominance. In this context, race functioned as a political identity, shaped by shared experiences of marginalization and articulated through appeals to solidarity among people of African descent. Territorial Pan-Africanism, by contrast, places Africa at the center of its analysis. It conceives of the continent as a political and geographic space requiring liberation, unity, and sovereign control. Here, territory is not merely spatial but political, tied to questions of statehood, sovereignty, and Africa's position in the international system. While this strand was largely advanced by African nationalists on the continent, it also drew support from diaspora figures such as George Padmore.

The distinction between these two orientations raises an important question: are they successive phases within a single evolving tradition, or do they represent distinct responses to different historical conditions? Scholars are divided on this issue. One group, including Jon Woronoff (1970, 24-35) and Ali Mazrui (1973) interprets Pan-Africanism as developing through a process of transition. In this view, an earlier emphasis on racial solidarity in the diaspora gradually gave way to a more territorially grounded movement centered on Africa. Similarly, David Apter and James Coleman (1976, 84-90) identify a progression from racial Pan-Africanism to nationalist movements and, eventually, to efforts at continental political unity. While these interpretations recognize important shifts in emphasis, they do not fully explain the mechanisms through which such transitions occurred.

A second group of scholars challenges this linear reading. Ifidon (2008), for instance, argues that what are often described as "racial" and "territorial" Pan-Africanism are better understood as historically distinct traditions shaped by different material conditions. Earlier Pan-Africanism emerged within the diaspora, where the central struggle was for civil rights, recognition, and inclusion in societies where political power was largely inaccessible. By contrast, the Pan-Africanism that gained prominence in the 1950s and 1960s developed in response to the concrete challenges of colonial rule in Africa, where the primary concern was the control of land, political authority, and the reorganization of society after colonial disruption. Colin Legum (1965, 38) similarly observes that although Pan-Africanism drew on racial ideas, it was never entirely defined by them, and its later territorial expression reflected a shift in priorities rather than a simple extension of earlier thought.

This article aligns more closely with the latter position. It argues that racial and territorial Pan-Africanism are best understood as overlapping but historically distinct frameworks, each shaped by different socio-political contexts and constituencies. While they share certain ideological elements, particularly an underlying consciousness of Black identity, they emerged in response to different problems and cannot be reduced to stages within a single, continuous trajectory. This distinction is further clarified by considering the scope and inclusiveness of each framework. Racial Pan-Africanism, especially in its early formulations, was primarily concerned with the experiences of Black populations in the diaspora and did not consistently incorporate non-Black Arabs of North Africa into its vision (Du Bois, 1897; Baulin, 1962). In contrast, mid-twentieth-century Pan-Africanism, shaped by the realities of decolonization, increasingly defined Africa in territorial terms and sought to include all regions of the continent, regardless of racial composition (Nkrumah, 1963). As Imanuel Geiss (1974, 4) suggests, Pan-Africanism can be understood in terms of three overlapping ideas: a shared racial identity, the regeneration of Africa, and the pursuit of political unity on the continent. While the first reflects a racial orientation, the latter two are more clearly territorial, underscoring the shift in emphasis that accompanied the rise of African nationalism.

Differences in leadership and focus further reinforce this distinction. Racial Pan-Africanism was largely led by diaspora figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, whose concerns were shaped by the conditions of Black life outside Africa. Territorial Pan-Africanism, on the other hand, was driven by African leaders including Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Jomo Kenyatta, whose political agendas were rooted in the struggle against

colonial rule and the quest for state sovereignty. That said, the two traditions were not entirely isolated from one another. Elements of territorial thinking can be identified within racial Pan-Africanism, as seen in Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement (Jacques-Garvey, 1980), while early African nationalism retained traces of racial consciousness influenced by diaspora thought (see Azikiwe, 1968, 7). This overlap reflects the circulation of ideas and individuals across the Atlantic world.

Kwame Nkrumah is particularly significant in this regard. His intellectual formation in the diaspora exposed him to racial Pan-Africanist ideas, while his political career in Africa was defined by a commitment to territorial unity and continental liberation. His thought therefore occupies a critical position at the intersection of these two traditions. It is within this tension —between race as a basis for global solidarity and territory as the foundation for political organization — that Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism must be situated.

3. Race and Anti-Racialism in the Thought of Kwame Nkrumah

Although Pan-Africanism emerged as a response to racial oppression in the Americas, Kwame Nkrumah consistently rejected the idea that racial identity should serve as the primary organizing principle of the movement. He described doctrines of racial superiority and inferiority as intellectually untenable and morally indefensible, arguing that racialism in all its forms should be treated as a social ill (Nkrumah, 1958; Nkrumah, 1967, 114). This position was evident in his public statements, including his address at the 1958 Accra Conference of Independent African States, where he unequivocally condemned racialism as both destructive to its victims and corrosive to those who uphold it.

We repudiate and condemn all forms of racialism, for racialism not only injures those against whom it is used, but wraps and perverts the very people who preach and project it (Nkrumah, 1969).

At first glance, this stance appears to place Nkrumah at odds with the historical foundations of Pan-Africanism, which had been rooted in the shared racial experience of Black people. However, his political practice suggests a more complex position. In 1945, he worked closely with George Padmore in organizing the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, an event that marked a turning point in the movement's orientation towards anti-colonial struggle. At this congress, Nkrumah played a key role in advancing demands for immediate independence and is connected with the drafting of the "Declaration to the Colonial Peoples of the World," which called for unity among colonized populations against imperial domination (Sherwood, 2010).

Following the congress, Nkrumah co-founded the West African National Secretariat (WANS), serving as its Secretary-General. The organization aimed to promote unity among West African territories as a basis for achieving independence (Sherwood, 2019). Its emphasis on regional solidarity — captured in the slogan "West Africa is One Country: Peoples of West Africa Unite!"— suggests that Nkrumah's early political thought was oriented more toward territorial organization than toward a purely racial framework. His own reflections in *Towards Colonial Freedom* reinforce this point, where he acknowledged that his conception of unity at the time was largely confined to West Africa rather than the continent as a whole (Nkrumah, 1963, x).

Even so, the racial dimension of his thought cannot be entirely dismissed. His focus on West Africa reflected, in part, earlier assumptions — shared by some African and diaspora thinkers — that the region represented a core location of "African" identity (see Hayford, 1911). In this sense, elements of racial consciousness persisted, even where his immediate political objectives were territorially defined. This places Nkrumah in a position that does not fit neatly into either racial or territorial Pan-Africanism as rigid categories.

Nkrumah's relative lack of emphasis on the condition of African-Americans and Caribbean populations further illustrates this shift in priority. Despite his own experiences of racial discrimination during his time abroad, his writings and political activities were primarily concerned with colonial rule in Africa and the structures that sustained it. His analysis of colonialism focused on political control, economic exploitation, and the transformation of social institutions, particularly education. These concerns point to a framework in which the central problem was not race alone, but the broader system of imperial domination.

Nevertheless, Nkrumah did not entirely abandon the language or symbolism of race. In *The Scepter of Black Power*, he invoked the idea of "Black Power," acknowledging the racial origins of Pan-Africanism while simultaneously expanding its scope (Nkrumah, 1968). On this, he had this to say:

For although the outward forms of our struggle may change, it remains in essence the same, a fight to the

death against oppression, racism and exploitation… (Nkrumah, 1968).

For him, the struggle against racial oppression was part of a wider global movement against exploitation and domination. In this formulation, race remained significant, but it was no longer exclusive; it became one element within a broader political project.

This position is further clarified in *Africa Must Unite*, where Nkrumah argued that the ultimate goal of Pan-Africanism would be realized through the political unity of the African continent.
But it is only when full political unity has been achieved that we will be able to declare the triumphant end of the pan-African struggle and the African liberation movements (Nkrumah 1963, 160).

His suggestion that such unity would mark the culmination of the Pan-African struggle raises important questions about the scope of that struggle. If its "end" is defined in terms of African unity, then Pan-Africanism, in this context, appears primarily territorial. At the same time, this does not imply that the concerns of the diaspora had been resolved, but rather that they were no longer the central focus of his political project.

Nkrumah's attempt to connect racial and territorial dimensions is evident in his broader conception of "Black Power" as part of a global movement of oppressed peoples. So,
Black power is part of the world rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, of the exploited against the exploiter… it is linked with the Pan-African struggle for unity on the African continent and with all those who strive to establish a socialist society… Black power gives the African-American an entirely new dimension. It is a vanguard movement of black people, but it opens the way for all oppressed masses (Nkrumah, 1968).

He linked the struggle of people of African descent in the diaspora with the political unification of Africa, suggesting that the latter would have transformative implications for the former. Nkrumah reiterated a related statement in 1969 when he declared emphatically that,
Real black freedom will only come when Africa is politically united. It is only then that the black man will be free to breathe the air of freedom, which is his to breathe, in any part of the world (Nkrumah1969, 8).

However, he did not fully explain the mechanisms through which a unified Africa would directly address the specific conditions of racial discrimination experienced outside the continent.

From the arguments above, it is evident that Nkrumah did not abandon racial Pan-Africanism but redefined its significance within a territorially grounded political project. In this respect, Nkrumah's thought reflects an important tension. On the one hand, he rejected racialism as an organizing principle and reoriented Pan-Africanism toward territorial unity and political sovereignty. On the other hand, he continued to draw on racial language and symbolism, acknowledging the historical foundations of the movement. His position therefore suggests not a simple transition from racial to territorial Pan-Africanism, but an attempt to reconcile the two within a broader framework of anti-imperial struggle. Thus, it is this unresolved tension between racial history and territorial politics that defines Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist thought.

4. Territorial Unity in the Thinking of Kwame Nkrumah

This section argues that Nkrumah conceptualized Pan-Africanism as a territorially grounded political mission in which unity, sovereignty, and control of political space became the central organizing principles. While he acknowledged the racial origins of the movement, he developed this thought and redefined Pan-Africanism in terms of the political organization of Africa as a continent. In *Africa Must Unite*, Nkrumah (1963) traces the development of Pan-Africanism through a series of conferences, beginning with the 1900 meeting convened by Henry Sylvester Williams and culminating in the Fifth Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945. He identifies the Manchester Congress as a decisive turning point, noting that for the first time since 1900, "the necessity for well-organised, firmly-knit movements as a primary condition for the success of the national liberation struggle in Africa was stressed (Nkrumah, 1963, 134)." This moment marked a shift from a loosely defined, diaspora-driven movement to one oriented towards structured political action within Africa.

For Nkrumah, this transition signaled the emergence of a territorial dimension in Pan-Africanism. Although initially expressed through regional initiatives rather than a fully articulated continental framework, it represented a movement away from a primarily racial focus towards a political conception of African unity. As he observed:
instead of a rather nebulous movement, concerned vaguely with black nationalism, the Pan-African

movement had become an expression of African nationalism (Nkrumah, 1963, 135).

In making this distinction, Nkrumah differentiated between Black nationalism, associated largely with diasporic struggles, and African nationalism, which he understood as the collective political consciousness of the continent.

Nkrumah's early political activities reflected this orientation. He regarded regional unity as a practical starting point for broader continental integration and therefore supported the idea of a united West Africa as a preliminary stage. He argued that:
The political situation in Africa today is heartening and at the same time disturbing. It is heartening to see so many new flags hosted in place of the old; it is disturbing to see so many countries of varying sizes and at different levels of development weak and in some cases almost helpless. If this terrible state of fragmentation is allowed to continue it may be disastrous for us all (Nkrumah, 1961, xiii).

These statements reflect his conviction that territorial unity was essential to securing political independence and resisting external domination. At the same time, he consistently warned against the dangers of fragmentation. Thus, "so long as we remain balkanized, regionally or territorially, we shall be at the mercy of colonialism and imperialism" (Nkrumah, 1963, 218).

The apparent tension between his critique of fragmentation and his support for regional initiatives can be understood in strategic terms. His advocacy for a United West Africa, as well as his involvement in the Ghana–Guinea Union and later the Ghana–Guinea–Mali Union, was intended as a means to an end rather than an alternative to continental unity. These arrangements functioned as transitional mechanisms — what Nkrumah described as a "lever" — for the eventual realization of a United States of Africa. Territoriality in this sense did not imply fragmentation but rather the consolidation of political units capable of sustaining wider integration.

A major step in advancing this territorial vision was the 1958 Conference of Independent African States held in Accra. This conference marked a significant departure from earlier Pan-African gatherings, both in its location and in its scope. It was the first major Pan-African meeting to be held on African soil and included participation from all independent African states, including those in North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco). Nkrumah described the occasion in the following terms:

When, on 15 April 1958, I welcomed the representation to the conference, I felt that at last Pan-Africanism had moved to the African continent where it really belonged. It was an historic occasion. Free Africans were actually meeting together *in Africa*, to examine and consider African affairs. Here was a signal departure from established custom, a jar to the arrogant assumption of non-African nations that African Affairs were solely the concern of states outside our continent. The African personality was making itself known (Nkrumah, 1963, 136).

This development redefined Africa as a territorial and political entity rather than a purely racial construct, extending the scope of Pan-Africanism to include the entire continent. Following this, Nkrumah intensified his efforts towards continental political union. Initiatives such as the Ghana–Guinea Union, later expanded into the Ghana–Guinea–Mali Union, and the formation of the Community of Independent African States were conceived as foundational steps toward a broader African federation (Nkrumah, 1963, 141-42). These efforts reflected his commitment to building political structures that could support continental unity, even though they operated initially at a sub-continental level.

By the early 1960s, Nkrumah had moved beyond earlier federalist proposals and began to advocate more strongly for the immediate political union of Africa. He argued that gradual approaches, particularly those emphasizing economic and social integration, would leave African states vulnerable to continued external influence. This position placed him in opposition to leaders such as Julius Nyerere, who favored a more incremental path to unity (Agyeman, 1975). The resulting divergence contributed to the formation of ideological groupings within Africa, including the Casablanca and Monrovia blocs, which differed primarily in their approaches to the timing and structure of continental integration. These divisions revealed the practical and political limits of territorial Pan-Africanism, even as they underscored its central importance. Despite these challenges, the establishment of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 represented a significant, if partial, realization of Nkrumah's vision. Although it fell short of the immediate political union he advocated, it institutionalized the principle of continental cooperation and affirmed the idea of Africa as a shared political space.

At the core of Nkrumah's territorial Pan-Africanism was the concept of Africa as a single political community. His articulation of the "African personality" formed part of this broader framework,

redefining African identity in territorial terms. In this formulation, to be African was not determined solely by race but by one's relationship to the continent and participation in its political future. Nkrumah's territorialism therefore did not simply replace the racial foundations of Pan-Africanism; rather, it redefined the basis of political community within the movement by shifting emphasis from shared racial identity to collective political organization and continental unity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Pan-Africanism has found expression in both racial and territorial terms, each shaped by distinct historical contexts and political demands. As it developed in the diaspora, Pan-Africanism was primarily racial in orientation, grounded in the shared experiences of Black populations confronting exclusion and discrimination. In contrast, its articulation on the African continent reflected the imperatives of colonial rule, political sovereignty, and the reorganization of society. These two strands did not simply follow one another in a linear sequence; rather, they coexisted and, at times, overlapped, even as they addressed different problems.

Although Pan-Africanism emerged as a movement concerned with the emancipation of people of African descent, it did not remain confined to a strictly racial framework. As Colin Legum (1965, 41) observed, it was never entirely "racially exclusive." Its later development in Africa expanded its scope beyond questions of race to encompass broader political and territorial concerns. In this context, earlier emphases on Black solidarity gave way to a conception of Africa as a political community defined not only by shared identity but also by common historical experiences, particularly colonial domination. Territorial Pan-Africanism thus advanced a vision of African unity grounded in the continent itself. It extended beyond the idea of a global Black community to include all peoples within Africa, regardless of racial classification, and placed emphasis on liberation, statehood, and continental integration. This shift did not represent a complete break from earlier forms of Pan-Africanism but rather a redefinition of its central objectives. The goal of unity remained, but its basis moved from race to territory, from shared identity to shared political destiny.

The thought of Kwame Nkrumah illustrates this reconfiguration. While he acknowledged the racial origins of Pan-Africanism, he rejected racialism as an organizing principle and instead advanced a territorially grounded vision centered on African unity and sovereignty. In doing so, he did not abandon the earlier emphasis on solidarity among people of African descent; rather, he incorporated it into a broader framework that prioritized the political unification of the continent. Nkrumah's contribution, therefore, lies not in effecting a simple transition from racial to territorial Pan-Africanism, but in redefining the movement as a political mission rooted in Africa while retaining awareness of its diasporic origins.

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