



MARCUS GARVEY AND THE RASTA COLOURS

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We are accustomed to talking and writing about the "pan-African colours" which occur so frequently in the flags of African States, but less accustomed to questioning how those colours came to be adopted and to become so widespread in Africa and elsewhere. We may think vaguely that they were adopted because they are the colours of Ethiopia (1), which is true up to a point, but does not explain the actual mechanism of their transfer from there to Ghana and beyond.

In this paper I propose to suggest a scenario for the process of dissemination of the colours which I hope will link all the disparate elements. In doing so I would like to emphasize that in my view the colours we are referring to are not just red, yellow and green, but black as well, exactly as in the flag of Ghana, and that the black star in the flag of Ghana is not there by accident but by very purposeful design (2).

The story starts with Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born negro agitator and organiser and founder of the United Negro Movement Improvement organisation. This was formed in Kingston, Jamaica on 1 August 1914. Two years later he removed to New York where the UNIA had its major successes as a black power organisation. Garvey and his organisation were both complex phenomena, and the UNIA had many different aspects. However the one which interests us is its "Pan-African" or "Back to Africa" side. The UNIA was intended to unite all negroes, not just those in the USA or the West Indies, and its basic flag of red, black and green was intended to symbolise this, as was the identification of the negro race with the concept of "Ethiopia".

The flag of red, black and green stripes was invented by Garvey, but there is evidence that he thought it was the flag of Ethiopia, i.e. the real African country of that name, or at least of the idealised African homeland (3). Garvey did not realise that the inhabitants of Ethiopia were not negroes but fully exploited the symbolic importance of an African state which had maintained its independence in the face of European aggression. The flag seems to date from the First World War period, but cannot be documented before 12 November 1918, when it is referred to in an FBI Report on Garvey:

In the office of the Negro World (Garvey's newspaper) there hangs the new Ethiopian flag which is red, black and green. Garvey explained that the meaning of these colours is that the black race between the blood and nature wins its rights, which he characterises a very noble thought.

In August 1920 Garvey explained the colours as meaning solidarity with the Reds of the world, green, solidarity with the Irish and black with the negroes but the more normal interpretation was as Cashmore puts it in a later book on the Rastas:

red representing the spilled blood of blacks, green as nature, and black as the colour of Africans' skins,

Garvey's most typical utterance on the subject was his visionary declaration

I see the angel of God taking up the standard of the Red, the Black, the Green saying "Men of the Negro Race, Men of Ethiopia, follow me!"

which he put about was a quotation from the Book of Psalms.

The chief instrument of pan-Africanism was to be a shipping line which would take new negro colonists back to Africa. The Black Star Line was founded by Garvey as an offshoot of UNIA in June 1919. Once again we are indebted to the FBI for a description of its flag (4). FBI agents attended the mass rally in Madison Square Gardens on 30 October 1919 at which two flags of the Line were ceremonially unfurled, which were described as being of green silk:

These flags contained red silk stripes running from tip to tip and crossing each other, with a large black star covering the point where the stripes intersect.

This description was later confirmed by Garvey himself. Another agent at the meeting mentioned that most of those present were wearing

the colors of the new colored flag - red, green and black

In August 1920 at another mass rally the national anthem of the "African Republic" was adopted: "Ethiopia, Thou Land of our Fathers", which referred to the colours at the end of each verse.

The Black Star Line went on to have a troubled history and closed in 1922. Garvey himself was prosecuted in 1923 and eventually deported to Jamaica in 1927. The RNV colours were repatriated with him, and lived on as the colours associated with the various political organisations he set up there, until they were overtaken by the birth of Rastafarianism.

Garvey is now seen as an important precursor of Rastafarianism and as the inspiration of several other Jamaicans who began inspirational movements linked with the notion of "Ethiopia", such as Leonard Howell, Joseph Hibbert and Archibald Dunkley. The Garvey colours were the first widespread colours of the movement and many Garveyite ideas, such as the affinity of the negroes with the free people of Ethiopia and the ideal of repatriation to Africa were embodied in the cult. The starting point was of course the coronation of the Ethiopian prince or Ras, Tafari, as Emperor of Abyssinia (as the country was known to Europeans) in 1930.

Ras Tafari was the son of Ras Makonnen and had been regent of the land since 1916 and had gradually ousted the Empress Zauditu on whose behalf he ruled, although he allowed her to keep the title until her death, when he was proclaimed Emperor Haile Selassie (5). This event had a great impact on the Afro-Americans and many enrolled themselves as "Abyssinians", proclaiming their wish to become Ethiopian citizens and fly the Ethiopian flag rather than the Stars and Stripes. Such flags were made available to their members at a dollar apiece in the 1930s. In Jamaica, Howell began to preach that Haile Selassie was God on earth, and Hibbert tried to establish the Ethiopian Coptic Church and many Jamaicans began to adopt Ethiopian-style names. The Lion of Judah became a popular symbol, leading eventually to the saying Rastaman a Lion and the wearing of the "dreadlocks" to symbolise the lion's mane (6).

It was in the creation of artistic forms and decorations symbolising Ethiopianism that the Garvey colours became transformed into those of the Rastas (7,8).

Gold was added to Garvey's colours, (says Cashmore), and they were incorporated into clothing, badges, paintings and prayer sticks or "rods of deliverance" to signify the determined effort of the Rastas to impress upon the world the presence of Garvey - if only in spirit: "The colours show that we are truly Ethiopians."

Since then they have become very widespread and the sight of a red, black, yellow and green woollen cap is familiar to us all today, along with the other manifestations of Rastafarianism such as reggae music and the cult of Bob Marley, the cult language and the alleged use of ganja (9,10,11,12)

Another Rasta symbol, although a negative one, is that of Babylon, signifying the land of exile in which they find themselves as in the song:

*By the Rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and there we wept,
when we remembered Zion.*

This Biblical parallel to the Jewish exile had first been made by Hubert Harrison, one of Garvey's associates in 1920, quoting Psalm 137.

Garvey himself moved from Jamaica to London in 1935, but his influence lingered on. He seems to have lost his illusions about Haile Selassie at the time of the Italian invasion when the Emperor also went into exile in Britain. This did not prevent many Jamaicans from trying to join the Ethiopian army, as recommended by Garvey's second wife Amy Jacques Garvey. Thirty years later when the Emperor visited Jamaica himself, it was to a tremendous welcome. Since 1975 the late emperor has become an idealised figure, much as Garvey himself pictured Ethiopia in symbolic terms.

Garvey was one of the prime influences in the thinking of another fallen idol, the late Kwame Nkrumah.

Nkrumah was a student at Lincoln University in the 1930s. He wrote in his autobiography that Garvey was the writer who most impressed him, after Marx and Lenin, and that he used many of his ideas in his own political philosophy. In 1942, at his graduation ceremony, he delivered an oration on the text "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand unto God", Garvey's most famous dictum. Nkrumah was acquainted with many negro activists, both in West Africa and the USA and also with C.L.R. James, the late West Indian historian and philosopher. In my view he must have encountered the Rastafari movement at this time, and become familiar with the sight of its emblems. Unfortunately I am unable to document this assertion and can only point to circumstantial evidence. Certainly he was in close contact with George Padmore, a Trinidadian originally named Malcolm Nurse, who was a left-wing Afro-American organiser in the USA and later in London. The key role played by this man in the development of pan-Africanism has been unfortunately overlooked by modern historians. From 1945 Nkrumah was friendly with W.E.B. Du Bois, the American founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and organiser of the first four Pan-African Congresses. Du Bois had not always been on friendly terms with Garvey particularly at the time of the Black Star Line fiasco, but Nkrumah seemed eclectic enough to benefit from them both.

The Fifth Pan-African Congress held in the Town Hall of Chorlton cum Hardy (a district of Manchester) in 1945, proved to be one of the key events in the history of both decolonisation and internationalism. It brought together a number of significant individuals, including Nkrumah, Du Bois, George Padmore, Mrs Amy Ashwood Garvey, Obafemi Awolowo, Jomo Kenyatta, Hastings Banda and at least one Rastafarian. The hall was decorated with the flags of Ethiopia, Liberia and Haiti, representing the then independent "negro" states.

Nkrumah and Padmore were the organising secretaries and after the Congress these two kept things going in London by means of a group known as The Circle. In 1947 Nkrumah returned to the Gold Coast as the Secretary of the United Gold Coast Convention, and in 1949 broke with this party to form his own, the Convention People's Party which was dedicated to securing the independence of the country. The flag of the CPP was laid down in its constitution as being an horizontal tricolour of red, white and green. The provenance of these colours is unknown, unless we can assume that they were an adaptation of the UGCC colours of red, white and gold. Nkrumah went on to achieve his goal, and the Gold Coast, now named Ghana, became independent on 6 March 1957.

The flag of Ghana was announced to the world on 10 October 1956, and was, as we all know it today, resplendent in its Ethiopian colours emblazoned with the Black Star which Nkrumah had borrowed from Garvey (20)². A huge parade ground and triumphal arch were built in Accra, called Black Star Square and later on the Black Star Line was re-founded as the Ghana National Shipping Corporation.

The colours red, yellow, green and black went on to become widespread in West Africa and were adopted by the **Rassemblement Democratique Africain** in French West Africa. In 1963, W.E.B Du Bois, who had spent the last months of his life as Nkrumah's guest in Ghana, died and was buried in a coffin draped in this flag in the Pan-African colours outside Christiansborg Castle in Accra, (29 August 1963).

The question arises as to why the Ghanaian national flag was not in the CPP colours, as would normally be expected. The answer seems to be that Nkrumah had not yet formed his later dictatorial notions of a one-party state. As we know he did in fact decree later that the national flag should be the Party flag with the black star. In his "Dawn Broadcast" of 8 April 1961 he abolished any separate flags used by the TUC, the Farmers' Council and other national institutions etc and compelled them to use the Party flag in an almost Hitlerian act of **Gleichschaltung**. In January 1964 the yellow strip of the national flag was altered to white, and remained so until his overthrow, being restored by the National Liberation Council on 28 February 1966.

In exile in Guinea, after this, Nkrumah and Sekou Toure launched the **Parti Revolutionnaire de Tout le Peuple Africain** in an attempt to regain the political high ground, using the black star and the pan-African colours once more (13). Nkrumah had formed an association with Toure when the latter emerged as the opponent of the French **Loi Cadre** system at the Bamako conference of the RDA in 1957. He, Modibo Keita of the Soudan and Senghor of Senegal were in favour of some form of West African federation, but Toure found himself

isolated after the referendum of 1958. With the assistance of Padmore and his Ghana-based Bureau of African Affairs, Nkrumah offered to form a Ghana-Guinea Union, which was formed on 23 November 1958 with a joint flag like that of Ghana with two black stars. In May 1959 it was announced that the Union would be renamed the Union of African States with a flag like that of Ghana "with as many black stars as there were members". In April 1961 Mali (formerly linked to Senegal) joined the UAS and which could then be presumed to have had a flag with three black stars. Nkrumah, like Col. Gaddafi today, was keenly interested in linking his country with any other African states which would join him, and his activities in many ways ran counter to those of more general African internationalism.

The pan-African colours rapidly spread to other African liberation movements after 1957, and **Annexe A** lists the States which adopted them in chronological order (14). It will be seen that some of these are West Indian states. Dr Smith has told me that he had these colours in mind in the design of the flag he sent to Guyana in 1966, the design which became the basis of the actual national flag. It should be borne in mind, though, that in Guyana, only a minority of the population is of African origin. The colours were also adopted in Grenada, and in their most emphatically Rastafarian form in St Kitts. Of course, none of the official explanations of the colours describe them in these terms.

A final twist of the wheel came with the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, when the black, red, yellow and green ZANU colours were transformed into those of the national flag. On the occasion of the independence ceremony Bob Marley and the Wailers performed at the official celebrations playing **Rastaman Vibrations** and **Africans A Liberate Zimbabwe** and other pieces in the reggae style.

As a final footnote to this narrative should be mentioned the continued survival of the Garvey colours without the Rasta gold (15,16). The red, black and green were adopted by Hastings Banda (Malawi National Congress), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya African National Union) Forbes Burnham (Guyana Peoples' National Congress) and lived on in the USA. Firth has described their use there, including the famous Newark, New Jersey, incident in 1971 and their use by the Pan-African Congress. Such flags are still offered in the catalogues of American flag manufacturers and are on sale in such well known emporia as the Flag Store in San Francisco. Firth is rather more disparaging about the use of such "compensatory" symbols than Cashmore, who quotes with more approval Abner Cohen on the use of symbols for an "invisible organisation". The flags of Banda and Kenyatta went on to become, in modified form, other countries' national flags.

Whether the flag of Biafra falls into this category is not possible to say, as it is probable that the colours were taken from the coat of arms of Eastern Nigeria, but these in turn may have been proposed by Nnamdi Azikiwe, at one time Prime Minister of Eastern Nigeria.

This, like other aspects of the problem, remains something for further investigation. Research into this area is not easy, and I have had no luck in pursuing the main link in the chain, namely, the real reasons for the choice of the design of the flag of Ghana in 1956. Approaches to the National Archives of Ghana and to the College of Arms in London have proved unsuccessful.

Until this stage in the narrative can be fully documented, this report must remain an interim one, but the weight of circumstantial evidence seems to me to be overwhelming that the pattern of events was as I have described, namely, that the Ethiopian colours crossed the Atlantic in the 1930s and met with the Garvey colours in Jamaica, where they became the colours of the Rastafarians. From there they, together with the black star emblem, moved into the consciousness of Kwame Nkrumah, perhaps with the aid of his two West Indian assistants, George Padmore and TR Makonnen. In turn he set them up in Ghana and thus created what we call today the Pan-African colours (17).



NOTES

- 1 Hill, Robert ed., **Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers**, University of California Press 1982, Vol. 1, p290
- 2 **Ibid.**, Vol I, p.lxxv
- 3 Cashmore E., **Rastaman: the Rastafarian Movement in England**, George Allen and Unwin 1979, p160. This reference also contains a useful analysis of the reasons why signs and symbols are adopted.
- 4 **Ibid.**, p159
- 5 Hill **op cit** Vol II p142
- 6 **Ibid.**, p292
- 7 **Ibid.**, p133
- 8 Adekunle Ajala, **Pan-Africanism: Evolution, Progress and Prospects**, Andre Deutsch 1973, p345ff. The Anthem was adopted at the same time as the Declaration of the Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World at the First International Congress of Negroes, held in Liberty Hall, New York, on 13 August 1920., Full documentation of the meeting is also contained in Hill **op cit**, Vol. II
- 9 Cashmore, **op cit**, p3
- 10 Campbell, Horace, **Rasta and Resistance - from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney**, Hansib Publishing 1985, p77
- 11 **Ibid** p70
- 12 **Ibid** p100
- 13 Cashmore **op cit** p159
- 14 Campbell **op cit** pp74-75
- 15 H James was the founder in 1935 of the International African Friends of Abyssinia, which later became the International African Service Bureau and which linked several West Indian and West African politicians and included Mrs Amy Ashwood Garvey (Garvey's first wife)
- 16 Geiss Immanuel, and Ann Keep trd. **The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan Africanism in America, Europe and Africa**, Africana Publishing Co., New York 1974 p272
- 17 **Ibid.**, pp401 and 406. The Rastaman was T Ras Makonnen (originally a Guyanan called Griffiths.) He later went to Ghana with Nkrumah and ran the African Affairs Centre but eventually broke with him.
- 18 Nkrumah Kwame, **Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah Thomas Nelson**, Edinburgh 1957, p293. See also p73 for a rather damning account of the adoption of the UGCC Party flag.
- 19 **Gold Coast Today** Gold Coast Office, London 10 October 1956
- 20 Geiss **op cit**, p 278
- 21 A note from Dr Whitney Smith to the author reveals that the green, yellow and red tricolour was used for decoration at the 3rd Inter-Territorial Congress of the RDA at Bamako in September 1957.
- 22 Nkrumah Kwame **The Revolutionary Path**, Panaf books 1973, p158
- 23 Armah Kwesi, **Ghana: Nkrumah's Legacy** Rex Collings 1974 p85. General Ankrah decreed that
the CCP flag which was so whimsically imposed on the country as the national flag shall cease forthwith to be the national flag of Ghana. The NLC is accordingly taking the necessary steps to restore the original national flag of Ghana ...
- 24 **Times** 24 November 1958
- 25 **Times** 4 May 1959
- 26 Firth Raymond, **Symbols, Public and Private** George Allen and Unwin 1973 p348 and Cashmore, **op cit**, p160. The Newark flag incident was reported in **Flagmaster** 006.

ANNEXE A:
COUNTRIES ADOPTING THE PAN-AFRICAN COLOURS

COUNTRY	DATE OF ADOPTION
Ghana	10 October 1956
Cameroon	29 October 1957
Guinea	October/November 1958
Central African Republic	1 December 1958
Mali Federation	4 April 1959
Congo (Brazzaville)	18 August 1959
Dahomey	16 November 1959
Togo	27 April 1960
South Kasai	9 August 1960
Senegal;	20 August 1960
Mali	1 March 1961
Rwanda	September 1961
Guyana	January 1966
Congo People's Republic	1 January 1970
Zaire	21 November 1971
Guinea-Bissau	24 November 1973
Grenada	7 February 1974
Sao Tome and Principe	26 November 1974
Cape Verde	30 December 1974
Zimbabwe	18 April 1980
St Kitts-Nevis	19 September 1983
Burkina Faso	4 August 1984

The flag of the Partido Africano da Independencia de Guinea e Cabo Verde from which these flags are derived had already been adopted in August 1961.

The adoption by the former Upper Volta of a flag in red, green and yellow marked the "capture" for the colours of a country formerly in the camp of those opposed to the notion of a large Mali Federation. Upper Volta had originally been one of the four countries involved in this project but was seduced away from it by the French and Houphouet Boigny's bogus Sahel-Benin Entente.

ANNEXE B:
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 Flag of Ethiopia with the Lion of Judah
- 2 Flag of Ghana
- 3 Marcus Garvey in convention with the UNIA
- 4 The Garvey Flag, the Black Star Line and the Rasta Flag
- 5 Haile Selassie and his Imperial Standard
- 6 as 4
- 7 Rasta Baby poster flag
- 8 Born Black poster flag
- 9 Bob Marley poster
- 10 Bob Marley and Rasta colours on flag of Jamaica
- 11,12 Street signs in Toxteth, Liverpool decorated in Rasta colours
- 13 Badge of the Parti Revolutionnaire de Tout le Peuple Africain
- 14 The Pan-African colours in the flags of various states
- 15 The Garvey colours in the flags of various political parties
- 16 Poster for the Guyana Peoples National Congress.



