

FROM HARLEM THROUGH *NÉGRITUDE* TO BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to examine the specific process of transfer and transition of ideas, thoughts, and actions on Pan-African cultural, social, and economic liberation by looking into the connection and influence between the different movements of the Harlem Renaissance, the *Négritude*, and the Black is beautiful movement. The movements are rooted in the African awakening and the African diaspora's engagement with the Pan-African ideas of liberation of Africa, dismantling of white supremacy, and the economic and social empowerment of Black people. This is a vast and complex process of intellectual and cultural exchange that spreads beyond one continent and consecutively and simultaneously across Africa, Europe, and America. By drawing on cultural transfer theory and the theory of entangled history, we will see how the impulses of the cultural and social movements on the advancement of Africans and African heritage show a steady personal and collective transformation and progress. It showed that the movement to raise awareness of one's racial identity, uniqueness, and beauty is fluid and fluent. The birth of an idea can lead to a chain of spontaneous cultural formations across time and space, leaving artifacts as testimonies.

KEYWORDS: Pan African; cultural transfer; African diaspora; cultural movements

Introduction

The beginning of the 20th century marked the First Pan-African Conference, which took place in 1900 in London. The conference formally established the ideas of Pan-Africanism, aimed at encouraging and strengthening bonds of solidarity between all indigenous peoples of Africa, along with all peoples of African descent. The belief extends beyond continental Africans with a substantial support base among the African diaspora in the Americas and Europe (Omotayo, 2012, p. 190). As a result, the 20th century saw the formation of philosophical and cultural strongholds of African active work on their own past, present, and future. Life-changing ideas and actions echoed across the vastness of territories as harbors of mutual exchange and delivery. The process of transfer and transformation of ideas and actions lasting more than a century shaped much of the future of the African people and the people of African descent. The core aspect of this process is the cultural background and its social, political, and economic impacts. Culture, history, and economy are inextricably bound. In his 2012 paper “Culture and the Historical Process”, Nathaniel Nunn states: “In thinking about the sources of historical persistence, culture plays a potentially important role because it is a slow-moving variable whose evolution can be affected by historical events” (Nunn, 2012, p.3). As a result, a cultural awakening can lead to personal and social transformation. Essentially, the cultural movements that emerge in America, Europe, and Africa show that the transformative nature of the thought leads to a unifying action. As Nunn claims, culture evolves in the background to all the shocking and shaking events (p.12-14). He defines culture as the “decision-making heuristics, which typically manifest as values, beliefs, and social norms” (p.1). The cultural heritage and its understanding serve as the backbone for future action. In this respect, our study looks into the cultural transfer theory of metamorphosis and adaptation of ideas and actions, the contextualization, and the transnational perspective.

Pan-Africanism and Cultural Transfer

The Harlem Renaissance in America gave rise to the *Négritude* movement, which led to the Black is beautiful, the Black is beautiful to the Black Consciousness movement, and further on. In this context, by means of the entangled history theory, we can see the results of multi-directional transfer and interactions between people over time and space. The study of cultural “relations” and “exchanges” has been a subject of interest for a number of disciplines, such as political science, literary studies, cultural studies, history, etc., and it requires a necessary theoretical and methodological framework and an established heuristic apparatus. As a result, the theoretical approach of cultural transfers was created in the 1980s based on a set of established questions and objectives in a specific academic and cultural context (Jørgensen & Lüsebrink, 2021).

Cultural transfers as an approach emerged out of the initiative of historians and specialists in literary studies, mainly from France and Germany, and under the leadership of Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, both initially specialists in German literatures and cultures. The concept of “cultural transfer” and the methodological and theoretical framework which it implied intended, on the one hand, to replace more traditional and unprecise concepts like “cultural relations”, “cultural exchanges”, “literary influences” and “cultural circulations”; and, on the other hand, to connect with the advances made in the 1970s and ‘80s in linguistics, anthropology, literary theory and translation studies (Jørgensen& Lüsebrink, 2021).

According to Jørgensen& Lüsebrink (2021), rather than standing for a general intercultural theory, the cultural transfer conceptualizes “certain forms of intercultural processes: precisely the circulation and reception of texts, discourses, cultural practices and forms of knowledge between different cultural areas. Here, a “cultural area” is defined as a geographical space having in common one or several languages of communication, a specific communication system and specific values and rituals” (Jørgensen& Lüsebrink, 2021). Consequently, the cultural transfer between African communities and those of African descent formally confirms the cultural transfer by the formation of literary, cultural, and social movements across different continents. In particular, the Pan-African conduit establishing the Harlem Renaissance, Négritude, Black is beautiful, Black Consciousness, etc., is an example of deep-structure transfer, operating at a psychological level affecting underlying values, thought patterns, and worldviews. Similarly, the Pan-African cultural transfer falls into the theoretical concept of entangled history (EH). According to Sönke and Maier (2015), “Entangled History (EH) is a historical perspective and a concept in historiography. Taking a trans-cultural perspective as the main point of departure, EH centers on the interconnectedness of societies” (Sönke & Maier, 2015). The Pan-African transfer, as an ongoing process, is a mutual, multi-directional transfer of knowledge, thoughts, and ideas.

The onset of the worldwide African cultural formations for advancement was not a simple spill-over process. Instead, the spread of ideas and actions was a natural action and reaction reflecting the fight for equality on a global level. The actor-centered approach of the cultural transfer theory posits the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s as a “vector” of transfer of the African awakening ideas that influenced the establishment of the *Négritude* philosophy. In particular, the prolific writing of the writers, including Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Claude McKay, was brought closer to the African diaspora by the Nardal sisters (Pauline and Jane) in the 1920s and 1930s in Paris. They introduced young black students and scholars, mainly from the French colonies and territories, to the Harlem ideas and themes on race relations and identity. In the sisters’ Paris salon, contacts were established, and the philosophy of the *Négritude* took root with writers and activists such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon Damas. *Négritude* is a term used to denote a framework of critique and literary theory, mainly developed by francophone intellectuals, writers, and politicians in the African diaspora during the 1930s. The movement was largely grounded in raising and maintaining “black consciousness” across Africa and the African diaspora, while disavowing colonialism, racism, and Eurocentrism. Jane Nardal’s 1929 article “International Noir” inspired Senghor’s first critical theory writing, “What the Black Man Contributes,” published ten years later (Sharpley-Whiting, 2000). In turn, Leopold Sedar Senghor later became a prominent Senegalese politician, cultural theorist, and poet who served as the first president of Senegal from 1960 to 1980. Conversely, American writer and academic W.B DuBois, as one of the grassroots organizers of Pan Africanism, personally experienced the reciprocal process of transfer of culture and ideas. His life and work stand for the bridge between times, cultures, and continents. W. B. DuBois’ visit to Africa happened towards the end of his life when he had already gone through all the major American and world events, worked tirelessly on all African-American initiatives, and led the major movements for the betterment of their position. At the fifth Pan-African Conference in late 1945, Du Bois met Kwame Nkrumah, the future first president of Ghana, who later invited him to Africa (Lewis, 2009, p. 661), but he only managed to get there in 1960, the “Year of Africa” since his passport had been confiscated by the U.S Government in 1951. The transnational perspective of the cultural transfer theory indicates the overlapping and

interconnectedness of the cultural context. The transcendence of thoughts and ideas that are recontextualized across time and space is seen in how the Negritude movement influenced the onset of the Black is beautiful cultural movement in the 1960s in the United States in America. It, in turn, later spread beyond this territory and took root in the Black Consciousness Movement of Steve Biko in South Africa. The Black is beautiful movement gave structure to black culture and identity in the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century in America. It presented the black past as a worthy legacy and exhibited cultural pride in black talent and achievements. The goal of the Black is beautiful was to establish and confirm personal belief, self-assurance and confidence in African-American potential and competence, ultimately achieving emotional and psychological well-being. Focusing on beauty, the Black is beautiful delved into the African heritage and tradition to reaffirm the beauty of it. This found its way into Americans embracing the African type of hairstyles and clothing. Many became interested in studying the specifics of African languages such as Swahili. The movement went further to take action in the formation of cultural entities led by activists and cultural icons such as writers and publishers Amiri Baraka and Toni Morrison, as well as actor Sidney Poitier, and the portrayal of the African-Americans in his movies. Theatre, media, and television furthered the breaking of stereotypes by reaching a wide audience. The result of this cultural transfer is spawning a number of movements that cross national boundaries and frameworks, enabling endless possibilities and variations.

Conclusion

The complex connection between the emergence of the Pan-African movements across the continents was examined through the theoretical lens of cultural transfer theory and entangled history theory. We saw how the shared histories between people can overcome differences and cross borders, and lead to recontextualization, adaptation, and metamorphosis of cultural and social actions. It showed that the movement for raising the awareness of one's racial identity, uniqueness, and the beauty of it is fluid and fluent. It proved that the birth of an idea can lead to a chain of spontaneous cultural formations across time and space, leaving artifacts as testimonies ready for future reference.

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