

African Student Associations in Britain before the West African Students' Union

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1. Introduction

The West African Students' Union (WASU) is an African student association that was founded in London in August 1925 through the initiative of Ladipo Solanke, a Nigerian law student. During the inter-war period, when the WASU was founded, African nationalism was making its first baby steps. Over the next 30 years, it served as a breeding ground for numerous prominent African nationalists like Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta. It also played an historically important role in fomenting the ideological current of Pan-Africanism through interaction with leading Pan-Africanists like Marcus Aurelius Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois and George Padmore (Garigue, 1953; Carey, 1956; Coleman, 1958; Geiss, 1974; Langley, 1973;

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Esedebe, 1978, 1982; Olusanya, 1982; Fryer, 1984; Boahen ed., 1994; Adi, 1994a, 1994b, 1998; Ochiai, 2018a, 2018b, 2019).

The aim of this article is to examine African student associations in Britain before the WASU. The article makes use of primary materials obtained through the author's direct examination of the Solanke Collection, which is held at the Gandhi Library of the University of Lagos Library in Nigeria.

2. Early African Student Associations in Britain

The history of people of African descent in Britain can be traced back to the Roman times (Shyllon 1992: 202), but it is not precisely clear when Africans or their descendants first underwent education in the country. However, when Europeans became engaged in the Atlantic slave trade, Africans were brought to England as slaves and servants. Among these slaves and servants were some who underwent education in languages and arithmetic to allow them to serve as interpreters for the purpose of trading with Africa. Then, in the 18th century, some African traditional rulers and merchants began sending their children to Britain to be educated (Adi 1994a: 9). Later, in the 19th century, some West Africans underwent higher education in Britain, although they were extremely few in number (Rich 1987: 153). For instance, in the 1850s, three Africans came from the Colony of Sierra Leone to England to study medicine with funding which the British government provided so that they could become military physicians. These students completed a course of studies in medicine. One of them was James Africanus Horton.

Later, Horton studied at King's College of the University of London and the University of Edinburgh, and in 1868, he published a book entitled *West African Countries and Peoples* in London (Killingray 1994: 8). However, at least until the end of the 19th century, there were extremely few students of African descent in Britain. Because their organisational ability and social influence remained very weak, there were nearly no attempts to organize students of African descent.

Probably the oldest African students' association in Britain to arise from this historical situation is the Afro-West Indian Literary Society, which was founded in Edinburgh at the end of the 19th century. The Society was founded mainly by students of African descent at Edinburgh University. In 1900, it sent two medical student representatives, Meyer (West Indies) and Richard Akinwande Savage (Lagos), to the first ever Pan-African Conference held in London in 1900 (Geiss 1974: 293; Esedebe 1982: 49; Adi 1994a: 12).

Also, while not a students' association in the strict sense, the African Association founded in London by Henry Sylvester-Williams of British Trinidad in 1897 cannot be overlooked when considering early students of African descent in Britain. The African Association aimed to encourage a sense of integration and promote friendly exchange among people of African descent. Additionally, it promoted and upheld the interests of all such people. It played an important historical role in the formation of Pan-Africanism, the aim of which was to achieve solidarity and unity among people of African descent. For instance, the association hosted the previously

described 1900 Pan-African Conference, and adopted a resolution to advocate for the rights of people of African descent and improve their positions in society. Rev. H. Mason Joseph (Antigua) and Sylvester-Williams served as President and Honourary Secretary of the Association, respectively. With legal student T.J. Thompson of Sierra Leone serving as Vice-President and Edinburgh University medical student M.J. da Rocha of Lagos serving as Vice-Secretary, students of African descent in Britain served in high offices of the Association, and seem to have contributed greatly to its activities (Adi 1994a: 11; Adi 1994b: 108).

In Edinburgh, a group called the Ethiopian Association was created in 1904. In Liverpool in the same year, the Ethiopian Progressive Association was founded by students from West Africa and the West Indies who were studying at several colleges in the city. In particular, the latter seems to have been short-lived as an organisation, but its purpose of fostering solidarity among people of African descent both inside and outside the country, and of improving their social position, marks it with the characteristics of Pan-Africanism. Also, this shows us that the Pan-Africanist thought continuously and widely permeated throughout students of African descent in Britain, even after the 1900 Pan-African Conference (Adi 1994b: 109).

In addition, at the beginning of the 20th century, organisations for students of African descent were also founded in university towns such as Cambridge and Oxford. Also, somewhat later, in 1922, a group called the Edinburgh African Union was founded in Scotland by African students from Nigeria, the Gold Coast, and South Africa.

Contemporary documents show that a student from Sierra Leone named J.B.S. Baxter served as the first President, while a student from Nigeria named Akimlawon Adefolu served as Vice-President.¹

However, partly because there were extremely few students of African descent in Britain at the time, and partly because they were scattered geographically across not only London but also provincial cities such as Edinburgh, Liverpool, and Oxford, the majority of such students' associations never progressed beyond the level of their own universities or regions, and remained as very small groups. Students' associations that, by contrast, played the role of bringing together and uniting students of African descent from all around Britain, and organisations with a broader perspective and scope of activities, were eventually founded, mainly in London.

The African Students' Union (ASU) founded in December 1916 was the first fruit of such efforts. E.S. Beoku Betts of Sierra Leone, who studied at London's Inner Temple, served as the ASU's first President, while K.A. Keisah and T. Mensah-Annan of the Gold Coast served as Secretary and Vice-Secretary, respectively, and C. Awoonor-Renner of Sierra Leone served as Treasurer. From a glance at its personnel, it would appear that the ASU was an organisation mainly of students from Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast in British West Africa. However, while the ASU's activities were always based in London, its stated purpose was to encourage solidarity among people of African descent in Britain and to provide them with things they urgently needed. In this sense, at least in theory, the ASU seems to have exceeded the narrow framework of a group for certain West African students living in London, taking

into account a broader range of African students from all over Britain. However, the ASU proved to be short-lived, apparently going into an early decline in the second half of 1917 before ultimately dissolving (Geiss 1974: 296-297; Adi 1994b: 108).

Thus, there were various attempts to organize students of African descent in Britain prior to the founding of WASU. However, if we regard the period from the founding of these organisations in the late 19th century to the First World War as the historical dawn of the organisation of students of African descent in Britain, the students' associations of this historical dawn did not go beyond the level of individual universities and cities, as previously described. Because they were very small-scale, being most often nothing more than friendship organisations, or because their infrastructure in terms of members and funding was extremely weak, most of these organisations were very short-lived.

However, some of the African students' associations in Britain that were founded after the boundary line of the First World War (for instance, the WASU) persisted for 30 years or more. They interacted with not only African students from all around Britain but also youth and intellectuals of African descent from West Africa, the Caribbean, and North Africa, carrying out a broad range of activities that brought these people together.

Next, among African students' associations in Britain founded during World War I and second-generation organisations founded shortly after the war, this paper will make mention of two organisations that it is believed will prove important in analysing the chain of events leading to the founding of the WASU by

Solanke, the Union of (for) Students of African Descent and the Nigerian Progress Union, and will conduct an examination of each. The former is likely the first and only full-fledged African student association in Britain that existed prior to the founding of WASU. For a time, Solanke was a member of this group, as well. The latter is a colony-level group for students from Nigeria, but like the WASU, it was founded on Solanke's initiative. His actions and thoughts deeply influenced its activities, so it is an organisation that should not be overlooked.

3. Union of (for) Students of African Descent

It goes without saying that the origins and motivations of attempts at organisation within society are not always the result of the spontaneous volition and abilities of the people who comprise the organisation. Rather, it is not at all unusual for groups and organisations made up of individual human beings to start as reactions or responses to outside impacts and influences. The founding of the Union of (for) Students of African Descent (USAD), the first full-fledged African students' association in Britain that existed prior to the founding of the WASU, was prompted by such external factors.

The founding of the USAD was prompted by the establishment of a student union that all students could use regardless of race or nationality. It was founded by an English Christian group called the Student Christian Movement (SCM) during the First World War in November 1917 in Russell Square, next to the University of London.

SCM's establishment of this student facility was to some extent an act of charity by a white Christian group that intended to ease the psychological trauma Asian and African exchange students then faced due to the racism and alienation of contemporary English society by providing them with a venue to gather together and to interact with English students and intellectuals, and to attempt to ameliorate to some extent the anti-British sentiment that might result (Green with Lockhart 1986: 208-209). Also, as the number of students of African descent in Britain remained extremely low at the time (as did their organisational ability) the USAD came into being thanks to the external patronage and support of the Christian group SCM.

First, when the student union was established in 1917 by the SCM, in the same year, a group called the West African and West Indian Christian Union was established by Christian students from West Africa and the West Indies who used the facility. This became the predecessor of the USAD. Because non-Christian students of African descent wanted to join the organisation, it changed its name to the USAD in order to open its doors to these students.²

The USAD, the organisation established through this chain of events, was at first nothing more than a small organisation made up mainly of Christian students. In the late 1920s, it experienced rapid expansion, growing from 25 people in 1921 to 120 people four years later. However, we must keep in mind that, contrary to the impression given by the organisation's name, the USAD opened its membership to all races, not only students of African descent, and therefore the previously described members of the USAD included

supporting members who were students of non-African descent from countries such as India and England in addition to the regular members of African descent.³

The 25 October 1924 edition of *West Africa*, a magazine focusing on West African issues, published an article entitled "The Union for Students of African Descent: Its Work in London for Africa," which was contributed by a student from the Gold Coast named C.F. Hayford-Benjamin who had served as President of the USAD. According to the article, the activities and roles of the USAD can be largely separated into two categories. Its first role is a social club whose purpose was friendship among members. The second role is a group aiming to achieve the intellectual betterment of members. Also, in relation to the former, dance parties and dinners were held from time to time, and concrete activities related to the latter included biweekly study meetings on religious, literary, artistic, and sociological themes held by the USAD at the SCM student union, where its headquarters was located, as well as various activities such as speeches by British colonial government officials and African intellectuals.⁴

While the USAD took the position of not participating in political activities, it expressed a strongly oppositional stance toward the British government with regard to racism and prejudice against people of African descent in British society. For instance, when the massive British Empire Exhibition was held in 1924, an article taking an insulting tone toward the West African colony exhibition corner was published in the London newspaper *The Sunday Express*. This article entitled "When West Africa Woos"⁵ was published in the

May 4 1924 edition of the newspaper, and within it the male English author of the article asks lewd questions regarding the sex life of a woman from the Gold Coast in the West Africa exhibition corner. The USAD regarded the article as vulgar and inflammatory toward the people of Africa, and it sent a letter to the Colonial Office expressing strong opposition to the article and demanding the amelioration of the treatment of Africans at the exhibition.⁶

Ladipo Solanke (see Photo 1) was born in Ofada, a village on the outskirts of Abeokuta in the southwest of Nigeria, in 1886 (or 1885). After completing his primary and secondary education in Abeokuta and Oyo, Solanke moved to the Colony of Sierra Leone and enrolled in Fourah Bay College. Solanke left Sierra Leone and travelled to England to study law in the early 1920s, when the USAD was increasing its membership ranks and beginning to actively engage in the previously described activities. Shortly after arriving in England in 1922 and enrolling in the University College of the University of London, Solanke became a member of the USAD. He then involved himself proactively for a time in the USAD's activities. Solanke gave talks on the laws and systems of the Egbe Yoruba, his own ethnic group, at a series of speeches hosted by the USAD, was selected as a member of the USAD's executive committee, and so on.⁷ However, for some reason, Solanke subsequently began taking a passive stance toward the activities of the USAD, and at last turned his interest to the foundation and activities of new students' associations instead.

It is not clear why Solanke, having joined the USAD for a time and having been selected as a member of its executive committee,

eventually distanced himself from the organisation's activities. However, it is likely that Solanke, who regarded himself as a believer in 'self-help' by Africans (that is, the notion of 'Africans saving Africa (Africans)'), was at the very least dissatisfied by the fact that the USAD was, as previously described, an organisation originally founded under the patronage of an English Christian group as an act of charity, that the organisation strongly resembled a student social club or friendship group, and that the organisation's members included English people and others of non-African descent.

Solanke's diary entries from around this time are instructive in this regard. The diary contains a list entitled "Re Union of Students of African Descent." The list contains numerous suggestions, sorted by category, for organisational reforms and new activities by the USAD. Among these, for instance, Solanke suggests that the USAD joins the Nationalist Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), a nationalist organisation founded on the initiative of E. Casely-Hayford of the Gold Coast in 1920, that it dispatch its own group of representatives to the Prime Minister's residence to advocate for the rights of Africans, and that it found an organisation called the United African Society, the Central Committee of the African Descent, or the Central Union Committee of the African Descent in partnership with other organisations of people of African descent in Britain.⁸ While it is impossible to know if Solanke in fact devised these suggestions on his own, based on the descriptions in the diary entry, it appears that, at the time, Solanke felt significant dissatisfaction with the USAD's activities and the form the organisation took, and that he perceived the necessity of reforms

and improvements. Solanke, who eventually gave up on reforming and improving the USAD, also left the framework of the organisation and set out to found a new students' association that would allow him to realise his ideals.



Photo 1. Solanke and his family

Solanke is in the far left.

(Photo courtesy of the University of Lagos Library)

4. Nigerian Progress Union

The Nigerian Progress Union (NPU) was founded in London in July 1924 by Solanke and other Nigerian students (Ochiai 2018a). According to the Rules of the Union, the aim of the NPU was “to raise in Nigeria and elsewhere a fund for definite educational purposes chief among which are: scholarships for Nigerian youths; the maintenance and multiplication of schools in Nigeria; the foundation of a hostel in London for African students; and the

promotion of research into West African laws, customs and institutions.”⁹

This straightforward and unassuming objective – to raise a fund for educational purposes – has no trace of the lofty ideals or zeal that often emerged when newly founded African organisations codified their objectives. Instead, the rather specific and concrete goals, such as funding for scholarships and the setup of a hostel, seem even to suggest that the NPU was nothing more than a fundraising vehicle. It seems rather odd that the NPU's only stated objective at the time of its inauguration was to raise funds given that the union did in fact go on to do more than just fundraising; as discussed later, it actively organised study meetings and lecture meetings among resident Nigerians. Why then, was raising a 'fund for definite educational purposes' the sole stated objective? Also, what significance did this hold?

At the time, for a Nigerian to have received a higher education in Britain meant being part of an elite. Thus, the NPU's objective might have echoed the students' own determination not to indulge in or waste this privilege, but instead to use it to advance educational opportunities among young Nigerians, who could then follow in their footsteps. It is here that one can easily detect the ideological influence of Solanke, who passionately argued that education was essential for Africans' advancement and that, to this end, Africans needed to make self-help efforts. Also, the fact that flowery words and pomposity were eschewed in favour of the specific goal of procuring educational funds might also have had something to do with the no-nonsense character of Solanke, who

placed more value in implementing concrete actions than in voicing abstract ideals.¹⁰

Later on, when the WASU was founded on Solanke's initiative, it adopted one of the NPU's funding goals, namely the foundation of a hostel for African students (which would also serve as a club house). Having taken the post of the WASU's secretary as before with the NPU, Solanke went to British West Africa alone as a WASU representative for a three-year period, during which time, he organised wide-ranging fundraising activities. In this way, Solanke took it on himself to deliver the NPU and WASU's common objective of raising funds for a hostel for African students in London. This is further indication of the close linkage and continuity between both unions' purpose and Solanke's personal drive.

During the second general meeting of the NPU, the members decided on officers and committees. Esin was elected as President, Olawole Lucas as Vice-President, Vincent as Treasurer, and Solanke as Secretary. Those elected to the Executive Committee were the President, Vice-President, Treasurer, and Secretary, as well as four other members: Johnson, Byass, Sorinola Siffre, and Martins.¹¹

What specific activities did the NPU undertake? The journal of the time, *West Africa*, ran a number of articles on the NPU's activities. As far as can be seen in these articles, the NPU engaged in debates at University College London¹² and organised lecture meetings to discuss various issues concerning "Education in West Africa," to which it invited as a speaker Prof J.E.G. de Montmorency, a professor of Comparative Law at the university. The NPU also

printed and sold booklets containing part of Montmorency's address.¹³ According to an internal document from the British government's Colonial Office, the NPU invited Hugh Clifford to a lecture meeting in 1924. At the time, Clifford held the important post of Governor of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria.¹⁴ As examples of other activities, the NPU published a collection of its members' memoirs recounting their experience as students in Britain and published them in booklet form with a view to raising funds,¹⁵ and while it never actually did so, the NPU also sought to publish its own newsletter.¹⁶ The NPU members supporting these activities numbered around 30 as of October 1925. Of these, 20 lived in London, and the rest lived in regional cities like Bristol, Birmingham, and Edinburgh (Ochiai 2018a).

5. Conclusion

On 7 August 1925, 21 students from four British West African colonies (i.e., Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia) gathered at Solanke's home in London. Their meeting that day was held in response to a call by H.G. Bankole-Bright, a Councillor of the Legislative Council of Sierra Leone Colony and a powerful member of the NCBWA, who was then visiting England.

At the time, at least in London, there were four organisations for people of African descent in Britain. Those were the Gold Coast Students' Association and the African Progress Union, which was made up mainly of middle-class professionals, in addition to the USAD and NPU, the organisations discussed in this paper. Many of

the students in attendance at that day's meeting were members of such organisations. However, Bankole-Bright, who spoke at the beginning of the meeting, while offering praise for the activities of such existing organisations, called for the founding of a student alliance that would specifically discuss West African issues and cultivate a sense of unity among West Africans. Also, following this suggestion by Bankole-Bright, the West African students in attendance held a debate, and formally resolved to establish the WASU.¹⁷

The WASU organisation that thereby finally came into being far exceeded the framework of a students' association, and was to play an important historical role in promoting colonial nationalism and the cultivation of Pan-Africanist thought in Africa. To examine these activities by the WASU is itself a fascinating academic undertaking, but there is no space in this article for such a discussion. The activities that took place after the WASU's founding will be discussed in detail in another paper.

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Endnotes

- 1 *West Africa*, 25 February 1922, p. 133.
- 2 *West Africa*, 25 October 1924, p. 1179.
- 3 *West Africa*, 25 October 1924, p. 1179.
- 4 *West Africa*, 25 October 1924, p. 1179.
- 5 Graves, C. "When West Africa Woos," *The Sunday Express*, 4 May 1924, NA CO 554/164. NA and CO stand for the National Archives (UK) and the Colonial Office, respectively.
- 6 A. Kasumu Soetan to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 14 May 1924, NA CO 554/164.
- 7 *West Africa*, 25 October 1924, p. 1180; 7 November 1925, p. 1475.
- 8 Solanke, L. *Diary, Note, Memo. etc.: Private and Confidential (1920)*, SOL Box 34. SOL stands for the Solanke Collection (the Gandhi Library, the University of Lagos Library).
- 9 NPU, *The Constitution of the Nigerian Progress Union*, 26 July 1924, NA CO 583/138.
- 10 In terms of this point, Solanke wrote in his diary, 'The society talk least but act most.' (Solanke, *Diary, Note, Memo. etc.*)
- 11 NPU, *The Minute Book*, 26 July 1924, SOL Box 78.
- 12 *West Africa*, 28 February 1925, p. 167.
- 13 *West Africa*, 7 March 1925, p. 178; 8 August 1925, p. 985; 13 March 1926, p. 279.
- 14 Hugh Clifford to Harding, the Colonial Office, 1 August 1925, NA CO 583/138.
- 15 NPU, *The Minute Book*, 13 December 1924.
- 16 NPU, *The Minute Book*, 11 October 1924.
- 17 *West Africa*, 15 August 1925, p. 1002.

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