The 2011 International Year for People of African Descent (IYPAD): The paradox of colonized invisibility within the promise of mainstream visibility

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Abstract
The United Nations declared that 2011 be recognized as the “International Year for People of African Descent” (IYPAD). This year marks the tenth anniversary of the World Conference Against Racism (often referred to as the Durban Conference), in which a resolution was approved stating that slavery and the colonization that sustained it were crimes against humanity. The outcome for this International Year is disappointing, if not shocking, at several levels, in terms ofmediatization, appropriation, program content, educational connection, and, significantly, any tangible impact in relation to people of African descent (PAD). The IYPAD was largely ignored and trivialized at the local, regional and national levels in almost all of the countries concerned. Following the hegemonic leadership of the United States, a number of nations proceeded to convert this International Year, which sought to underscore and engage all peoples in debates, actions and measures that could formally acknowledge historic injustices in relation to people of African descent, into the paradox of willingly rendering the focus of the Year invisible. Within this context of banalization of the IYPAD, this study, within an anti-colonial perspective, seeks to examine the international dynamic and related motives that characterize the significance of this problematic. Our analysis has led to three central interpretations: i) Africa, and all related and inter-connected questions, remain on the periphery of the world’s politics, economics and international political economy; ii) the competition between nations for the recognition of human history remains a political and economic affair,
and Africa and her descendants are not accorded a seat at the same table as the colonizing forces; and iii) the IYPAD declaration, ensconced in the yolk of an empathetic conscience by some and bad faith by others, can be seen as the residue of colonization, in which the degree of invisibility of people of African descent is still tethered to the heart-beat of colonizing nations and their proxy consorts, which are economically coerced and subjugated.

Keywords: International Year for People of African Descent (IYPAD), racism, invisibility, United Nations, decolonization, Durban declaration, racial identity, Whiteness

Introduction

The year 2011 was officially proclaimed the “International Year for Persons of African Descent” (IYPAD) by the general assembly of the United Nations (UN) in Resolution A/RES/64/169, adopted on December 18, 2009 (UN, 2009). The Resolution reaffirmed the International Declaration of Human Rights, and cited a range of important international covenants, including: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the International Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families; the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and many other international instruments related to human rights, which also cited the Vienna (1993) and Durban (2001) conferences, in which slavery was identified as a central issue. The IYPAD Resolution “encourages Member States, United Nations institutions, given their respective mandates and available resources, and civil society to prepare for the celebration of the International Year and to develop projects that would be able to be successfully implemented’’ (UN, 2009).

In the opening conference for the IYPAD on December 10, 2010, UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon (2010) emphasized the point that the slave trade and slavery were an “appalling tragedy, not only because of the barbarism, but also because of the extent, the organization, and the negation of humanity for the victims”. He affirmed that people of African descent (PAD) continue to be affected by the legacy of slavery, and, importantly, are among those most affected by contemporary racism. People of African descent are impacted through the denial of basic human rights, such as health care and education, and we could also add such fundamental parts of the human existence as housing, an acceptable environment, employment, justice, child survival rates, and life expectancy in relation to, and in comparison with, other groups. The General Secretary’s appeal to the international community seeks to never again accept that entire communities are marginalized owing uniquely to the colour of their skin and their race; further, his message at the leadership level is for member-states to ensure that the rights of people of African descent are not only respected but, moreover, that the political, economic, cultural and social heritage of PAD is widely recognized and affirmed. According to Ban Ki-moon (2010), the IYPAD has no loftier objective than eradicating racism once and for all.
Other official UN pronouncements echoed the sentiments of the Secretary General. For example, Navi Pillay (2010), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated that “this International Year offers the unique possibility to redouble our efforts in the struggle against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance affecting people of African descent throughout the world”. The UN Chair of the Expert Working Group for People of African Descent, Miriana Najcevska (2010), proposed to highlight the IYPAD under the banner “People of African Descent: Recognition, Justice and Development”. She elaborated that PAD have a right to be recognized, to have justice re-written because of historical wrongs and present-day concerns that further inhibit development. All of the UN representatives noted that financial contributions on the part of member-states would be necessary in order to realize a range of activities.

The 2011 IYPAD is now something of the past. The focus of our study seeks to examine this International Year: What are the results for this International Year? Were the promises imbued in the illustrious rhetoric announcing recognition of past injustices against PAD achieved? How was the IYPAD “celebrated” around the world? What signification was attached to the IYPAD, by whom and to what end? How were people of African descent involved in the IYPAD? What can be considered the tangible impact of this International Year in relation to PAD? Since education is a fundamental piece of the equation diminishing racism, what was the educational impact of activities associated with this International Year? What analysis did, and do, international, national, regional and local actors undertake in relation to this International Year, and what did they find? What were the catalysts and barriers to implementing and/or blocking the implementation of the IYPAD? Importantly, based on what has happened for this International Year, what should be the follow-up, and how should people of African descent, UN member-states, and citizens and peoples of diverse groups engage with the issues to actualize the intent of the Resolution framing the IYPAD? Employing a critical anticolonialist theoretical perspective, with a focus on the notion of invisibility, this article seeks to problematize, contextualize and examine the meaning of the IYPAD, culminating in an analysis that aims to answer the above questions. We would like to emphasize here that the invisibility paradox in relation to power, decision making, sovereignty and influence is coupled with a hyper-visibility of the African as being “tribal,” predisposed to crime, famine and disease, and considered clearly outside of the White norm.

The first section presents the international diplomatic context that framed UN Resolution 64/169 in relation to the IYPAD. The second section analyzes the underlying motivations that first expedited the drafting of the IYPAD Resolution, which was subsequently followed by efforts to block any meaningful implementation. In the third section, we focus on the concept of invisibility as a means of interrogating the IYPAD, and also to develop a critical conceptual analysis. The last section raises the linkage between the failure of the IYPAD and the enhanced forms of racism that emanate from the new period of colonization and modern colonizers. We conclude with the possible aftermath of the IYPAD, and notably, potential research and action trajectories that could lead to an academic activism aimed at effectively advancing
decolonization concerns within the framework of the proposed “2013-2023 International Decade for People of African Descent,” which was proposed by the UN in 2011.

Context for International Year for Persons of African Descent

The proclamation of the resolution presenting the IYPAD is the result of more than a decade of concentrated efforts by a number of international organizations, non-governmental organizations, committees and sub-committees. Specifically, it is worth highlighting the work of the UN High Commission for Human Rights (HCHR), the Expert Working Group for People of African Descent (EWGPAD), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Independent Expert on Minority Issues, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which all played a role supporting, critiquing and advancing the IYPAD.

*Figure 1: Official logo of the 2011 IYPAD*

*The Tenth anniversary of the Durban declaration (Durban +10)*

This IYPAD was intended to be an integral part of the tenth anniversary of the “International Year against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance,” which culminated with the Durban conference, August 31-September 8, 2001. The Durban Declaration and the resultant action-plan (DDAP) is an important document given its unique nature in that it provided a comprehensive list of recommendations seeking to address the situation for people of African descent. The Independent Expert for this file emphasized that institutions and organizations that have a mandate related to people of African descent should refer to and act upon the Durban Declaration. The Resolution emanating from Durban (A/CONF/189/12) stipulated that (only a few sections, which are directly related to this study, are highlighted below):
Noting with grave concern that despite the efforts of the international community, the principal objectives of the three Decades to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination have not been attained and that countless human beings continue to the present day to be victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance,

13. We acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade, including the transatlantic slave trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organized nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims, and further acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences;

14. We recognize that colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of colonialism and continue to be victims of its consequences. We acknowledge the suffering caused by colonialism and affirm that, wherever and whenever it occurred, it must be condemned and its reoccurrence prevented. We further regret that the effects and persistence of these structures and practices have been among the factors contributing to lasting social and economic inequalities in many parts of the world today;

32. We recognize the value and diversity of the cultural heritage of Africans and people of African descent and affirm the importance and necessity of ensuring their full integration into social, economic and political life with a view to facilitating their full participation at all levels in the decision-making process;

34. We recognize that people of African descent have for centuries been victims of racism, racial discrimination and enslavement and of the denial by history of many of their rights, and assert that they should be treated with fairness and respect for their dignity and should not suffer discrimination of any kind. Recognition should therefore be given to their rights to culture and their own identity; to participate freely and in equal conditions in political, social, economic and cultural life; to development in the context of their own aspirations and customs; to keep, maintain and foster their own forms of organization, their mode of life, culture, traditions and religious expressions; to maintain and use their own languages; to the protection of
their traditional knowledge and their cultural and artistic heritage; to the use, enjoyment and conservation of the natural renewable resources of their habitat and to active participation in the design, implementation and development of educational systems and programmes, including those of a specific and characteristic nature; and where applicable to their ancestrally inhabited land. (McDougall, 2011)

Background of UN International Years

Since 1959, the UN has decreed International Years that represent “the occasion to draw attention to significant issues and to encourage the world community to consider and act on these matters that have consequences for all humanity” (ACNU, undated). For example, 1959 was declared the International Year of the Refugee, then six years later 1965 was named International Year of Development, followed by several other International Years, including: 1970 – Education; 1971 – Struggle Against Racism and Racial Discrimination; 1975 - Women; 1978 – the Struggle Against Apartheid; 1979 – Child; 1981 – Handicapped Persons; 1985 – Youth; 1986 – Peace; 1987 – Housing for the Homeless; 1990 – Literacy; 1993 – Aboriginal Peoples; 1999 – Elderly. It is interesting to note that the website of the Canadian United Nations Association (ACNU, undated) highlights that the UN deliberately avoids designating every year with a specific cause because of financial considerations, and, significantly, in order to not trivialize the process. Although this may have been the case previously up until the end of the last millennium. From 2001 on the UN has designated every year to a particular theme, and has even honoured some years with several themes.

The focus of our inquiry is 2011 and the IYPAD, which was also shared with the International Year for Chemistry and the International Year for Forestry. The record for the greatest number of designations lies in 2008, when the Potato, Earth, Sanitation and Languages each laid claim to the title. One would reasonably have to question how the proliferation of these International Years could not lead to trivialization and a cause for concern. Moreover, why do some of the International Years appear to be linked to human rights and people, and others to products and resources? Is there a burgeoning and profit-oriented lobby behind the designation of these International Years? The question may seem ludicrous but the nature of some of the themes raises intrigue. For example, in addition to the themes cited above, there is Rice (2004), Natural Fibres (2009), and Astronomy (2009). While acknowledging the importance of these other themes to people and cultures, is it reasonable to require recognition, support, funding, and protection at the same level for the International Years as for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, youth, the elderly, disabled persons, Aboriginal peoples, and, especially for the purposes of this article, people of African descent? Therefore, we feel that the political, economic, diplomatic and social motivations of the UN, member-states, hegemonic forces and the international community is worthy of critical interrogation. For this article, our lens is focused on the International Year aimed at people of African descent, and whether it is beneficial to have had the International Year in the first place.
Who are people of African descent?

Naming a group as if it is homogeneous is a risk-induced and problematic enterprise. All socio-cultural and, for the purposes of this analysis, racial groups represent a range of identities, especially when taking into account place of origin, immigration and migration, place of displacement and exile, and diasporas. With specific regard to the African diaspora, we also need to consider majority and minority status, linguistic origin, religion, cultural identity, and a range of other markers, many of which are socially constructed. Ultimately, the question of race is often reduced to phenotypic traits, which vary a great deal depending on the variables mentioned above as well as mixing with other groups. All Blacks do not look alike, nor do they share the same traits, as would also be the case for all Whites. Skin color varies depending on diverse factors. Historically, the identification of PAD may have seemed more straightforward, given the historic patterns of racism, segregation, and slavery, which virtually prohibited the crossing of boundaries. Increasingly, and this can be witnessed in many countries in the North or “developed” West, in large centres increasingly there are numbers of people who develop relationships outside of their racial group. However, phenotypes, racial characteristics and racial identification continue to be a serious concerns throughout the world as there are, and have been, far-reaching political, economic, legal and socio-cultural implications.

Should people of African descent be locked into a specific geographic zone? If so, who are the Africans? Should Africans be identified as those living north of the sub-Saharan region, who have traditionally been identified and designated as Arab-speaking and generally lighter-skinned than Black Africans south of the Sahara? Should PAD also include White populations in South Africa and Zimbabwe, which was previously named Rhodesia? Do those of African origin in Europe count? Is it merely a question of skin colour? If so, are some of the populations of South-East Asia included as, arguably, their skin colour might be considered to fit into this rubric? What about those who were forced to leave Africa, principally in the United States, Canada, and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean? Should the racial category be linked to racial discrimination? An important point eluded to above concerns the mixed, inter-racial identity that many people have today (and have had historically). How much blood does one need to be a person of African descent? Does one have to be able to see the race phenotypically? Or does there need to be a bone fide linkage to parents and grandparents of African origin? Do children born of a parent who, in full or in part, is of African origin, have some claim to their Africanicity? All of these questions underscore the complexity of the problematic but we would want to emphasize that rejecting discussion of the contemporary nature, reality and concerns of PAD should not be discarded because of the numerous potential contradictions and concerns. Moreover, identity is a central feature to a range of fundamental national and local political debates, and understanding and contextualizing the problematic is, we believe, of the utmost importance (Dei & Kempf, 2006).

According to the Mouvement international pour les Réparations [International Movement for Reparations] (MIR, 2003), the term “people of African descent” refers to “Africa and its diaspora, whether as a result of the slave trade or through voluntary migration”. The MIR further
elaborates that to restrain the definition to the diaspora alone or to one of its components would futilely lead to obfuscation and confusion as people of African descent, regardless of their geographic location, face the same or similar discrimination based on phenotypes (skin colour, hair texture, facial characteristics, etc.). Clearly, individual experiences differ and not everyone from the same group will encounter the same types and level of discrimination, but the racial variable, especially the Black or African racial category, has a sustained and profound resonance throughout the world (Carr & Lund, 2007). Ultimately, social class and cultural capital will play an important role in differentiating lived experience but even the President of the United States can provoke incredibly intense sentiment and reaction based solely on his skin colour (Carr & Porfilio, 2011).

The emergent category labelled “Afro-descendants” by the UN relates to a spatial-cultural configuration different than the category “Black,” which is considered reductionist by some who believe that it only pertains to skin colour rather than cultural identity. According to Smeralda (2011), “Afro-descendants” relates to a type of kinship, membership, and recognition of origin even if some Afro-descendants in the diaspora consciously (or unconsciously) choose to deny or repudiate their African origins. This discussion is informative and pivotal in attempting to understand the ways that the IYPAD sought to value the cultures and contribution of Afro-descendants to world heritage while promoting their integration into the world community. The objectives were lofty and worthy but the commitment to engage and implement tangible, meaningful actions seems nebulous and paradoxical.

According to the UN, the African diaspora comprises some 200 million persons in the Americas, which does not include those who are, at least in part, the descendants of those displaced through African enslavement. Estimates are that roughly half of the population of Brazil (some 75 million) is of African origin, and there are some 40 million in the USA (roughly 13% of the population), 23 million in the Caribbean, where they form the majority, and five million in Columbia as well as populations throughout the rest of the hemisphere, including in Canada, where there are roughly 800,000 Blacks according to the 2006 census. In Europe, the PAD population is between seven and nine million, principally in Great-Bretagne, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Portugal, where a number of people from the former colonies have settled.

Diverse factors such as the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonization, the installation of military bases, and voluntary and involuntary migration and exile (students, workers, migrants, those affected by conflict and war) have led to the amassing of Africans and Afro-descendants in Europe, and elsewhere. However, the absence of disaggregated data collection based on identity, especially in Europe, makes it difficult to identify populations, issues and concerns for those who now find themselves in minority situations in countries believed to be White, even if the formal articulation avoids such language. France, for example, refuses to acknowledge or identify national minority groups within its territory, including developing conceptual and methodological instruments that could serve to accurately assess demographic realities (McDougall, 2011). Other European countries are caught in the same position owing to a data
collection system, primarily through national censuses, that does not seek such pertinent and targeted information.

In Canada, for decades census data collection has sought to further identify ethnic and cultural affiliation, and racial identity has also been ascertained but with a rather large caveat. The Canadian context has developed a category entitled “visible minority,” which is an encompassing catch-all for all non-White groups, including the descendents of enslaved Africans arriving to Canada form the USA in the 19th century, migrants from the Caribbean, economic migrants and refugees, professionals from Africa, and a range of immigrants from Asia (McDougall, 2011). Paradoxically, this manner of gathering data, or not gathering it all, renders the highly visible PAD invisible, often eviscerated by the mantra that we somehow now live in a colour-blind society, and that multiculturalism has rendered everyone equal (Carr & Lund, 2007).

The UN Independent Expert for PAD highlighted, in particular, the observations she made in relation to France, Guyana, Columbia, Canada and the Dominican Republic. For the last country mentioned, the report stated that, in relation to “the existence of internalised racism over the centuries...light-skinned people practice an active form of discrimination and oppression in relation to those with darker skin”. (McDougall in UN-CERD, 2011, p. 5). The “internalised racism” to which she refers is a common, predominant and systemic feature of all spheres of activity in the Caribbean. The report she issued argues that it is critical that an in-depth reflection on the most appropriate strategies to obtain meaningful demographic portraits exposing the true extent of diversity and lived experience become a priority. This work needs to be taken up internationally and nationally, and must move beyond platitudeous statements about historic wrongs. “Colourism” exists, even within predominantly Black societies, such as Haiti, and the long term effects are felt throughout communities, with education being a fundamental example of how differential outcomes may be the result of structural dislocation and sustained racialization. Poverty, racial profiling, differential and disadvantaged educational experience, police brutality, racial hate crimes, alarming incarceration rates, and unfavourable employment status are some of the common indicators used to understand the relative fluidity of the PAD experience across geographic territories.

In sub-Saharan African, often referred to as “Black Africa,” the PAD population is estimated to be greater than 840 million, with half of those being under 18 years of age (Population Reference Bureau, 2010). It is clear that massive investments in education, health care, youth integration and employment need to be realized for the region and the African diaspora to be able to claim their rightful place within the global community. In 2000, the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, formulated by 189 member-states, established measures and targets to guaranty significant progress by 2015 for the areas identified above. Now, some three years from the UN established timeframe, one in five girls are likely to undergo female circumcision and the concomitant health risks before the age of five, of being married by her family and becoming a mother by age 16, of being subjected to conjugal violence and the highest risk of contracting AIDS, not to mention sexual violence and the brutality of armed conflict that
is either a common feature to many regions in Africa, which, we believe, is the result, in part, of unsightly trickle-down residue emanating from colonial machinations. Thus, there is good reason to have an International Year for People of African Descent but to have it without serious deliberations and actions risks to only further exacerbate the fundamental problems that have festered and created the very need for such an International Year.

**The paradoxical invisibility of the 2011 IYPAD**

In our analysis of what was actually achieved during the IYPAD, it would be difficult, if not misleading, to state that the established objectives were met. Most countries did literally nothing, and many offered only a superficial press release or official pronouncement about the importance of this International Year. The superficiality with which the IYPAD was approached has led, we would argue, to the invisibility of people of African descent (UN, undated; UNESCO, 2011). At the anecdotal level, we presented papers at the American Education Research Association (AERA) conference in 2011 and 2012 to specialized audiences, with rooms filled with experts, scholars and educators working in the area of Africa, the African diaspora, race and critical pedagogy, and both times we were surprised, and concerned, that not one of them had even heard of the IYPAD. Several colleagues implored us to continue our work, and to publish our findings, believing that the colonial and hegemonic dimensions of this story exemplify the problematic of our times, especially in light of the reality that many Whites believe, or at least say they do, that race does not have any value in contemporary times (Carr & Lund, 2007).

The Chair of the UN People of African Descent Expert Working Group (EWGPAD), Mirjana Najcevska, who, not insignificantly, is a White woman, noted, in December 2011, in her analysis of the IY activities that progress in relation to the established objectives was minimal. From a non-governmental organization stand-point, Wareham (2011) emphasized that there was a distinct lack of energy and resources consecrated to this IY, and, moreover, that little progress had been made on these important issues since the 2001 Durban Conference. Wareham (2011) offers several historical and geopolitical factors that help explain the context and framing of international lethargy around addressing the IYPAD’s objective, which we elaborate on below:

i. Multiple initiatives by Western Europe, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to block declarations and measures proposed by the Expert Working Group in relation to racial discrimination, including attempting to remove the concept of racism for the UN Commission on Human Rights;

ii. The successful effort by the above group of countries to weaken the concept of racism while accentuating the inclusion of xenophobia and intolerance within international organizations;

iii. The refusal of the EWGPAD to consider requests from non-governmental organizations representing the African diaspora in relation to reparations for Afro-descendants for crimes against humanity committed against their ancestors;
iv. The withdrawal from the Durban Conference by the USA and other Western countries because of the (perceived and real) support given to the Palestinian cause, which positioned the USA, in particular, to invalidate the Durban Declaration, and to re-double its support for Israel;

v. The lack of funding for the EWGPAD, whose creation was one of the few tangible results of the Durban Conference, thus exemplifying the invisibility of Afro-descendants even when groups are formed to defend their interests;

vi. The flagrant lack of follow-up and monitoring of the Durban Declaration, which runs counter to other UN international conferences, which traditionally have formal review mechanisms;

vii. An official boycott by the USA and other countries of the 2009 EWGPAD meeting, still using the same pretext of anti-Semitism against Israel as the reason that positive movement cannot be made in relation to people of African descent;

viii. The refusal of the General Assembly of the UN, in an unexpected, abrupt (but likely manipulated) about-face, to support the proposed theme by African diaspora organizations for the IYPAD, “Recognition, Justice and Development,” with the situation in Haiti being presented as the centre-piece. This theme would have generated significant interest and activities but a much restrained approach ultimately won the day.

ix. Leaders in member-states appeared to make no effort to highlight this IY, almost no funding was accorded to support it, and the majority of activities were conducted by civil society, not official, formal and legitimized bodies, which should have been engaged to do so;

x. The international political and economic context since 2001 (unemployment, September 11, restrictions on immigration, economic crises) have contributed to the degradation of efforts to fight racism and to advance efforts in recognizing and advancing the rights of Afro-descendants;

xi. In sum, at the national level, governments, particularly within the Western European/North America axis, seem to have deliberately ignored the IYPAD.

At this stage, it is important to underscore the invisibility of perhaps the most visible, and, arguably within a formal normative sense, the most important/powerful person in the world, the President of the United States of America. The reality that this person is the first person of colour, a Black man, whose father was African, from Kenya, and who should naturally have an affinity to engage in the issues raised by the IYPAD, and who chose to be silent, is a telling metaphor of the invisibility of people of African descent. If Barak Obama will not choose to speak to these issues, will not make them some form a priority, will not position them to be acknowledged and rectified with the enormous political and media spot-light that he has shone on him every day, then when is the time, and who will carry these issues forward? If he feels that he cannot speak to these issues, given his personal, cultural and political background, his philosophy and ideology for “hope and change,” and his mandate as the President of the USA, is
he then just another captain of industry and director of the empire (Carr & Porfilio, 2011)? The
decision by the Obama administration to boycott Durban III in September 2011 for the same
reasons evoked above could not speak more condemingly toward the focus of the IYPAD.

Not to be outdone by the Americans, President Nicholas Sarkozy, former President of
France, decreed that 2011 be the Year of the “Outre-mer,” which not only negates the IYPAD
but also establishes a special category of seemingly racialized but invisible others who are part of
France but who cannot have their African origins discussed. The French citizens living in what
the French call the “DOM-TOM,” departments and territories outside of mainland France which
contain those who are of African origin, such as in Martinique and Guadelope, and French
Guiana, are permitted to integrate and be integrated in so much as they do not raise the obvious
issue of racialization, racism and racial identity, thus rendering them invisible and vulnerable
(Diarra, 2003).

The invisibility of People of African Descent in the world

Najcevska (2011), the Chair of the EWGPAD, articulated that “new forms of discrimination and
segregation have appeared, of which one of the principal traits is the invisibility of people of
African descent. This invisibility is due to insufficient statistical data on people of African
descent, notably in Europe…”. We could also add that PAD, because of colonialism, are also
denigrated within systemically ingrained thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, knowledges,
understandings, and engagements with African peoples and their history. In general, what is
known about Africa, in comparative terms, is limited, distorted and misrepresented, and the
desire to engage and promote African languages, traditions, cultures and pride at the
international level, especially when viewing this through the educational prism, is limited and
could even be considered nefarious. Importantly, the negative imagery, acceptance and
engagement with Black or African phenotypes are clouded with multiple layers of racist history,
socialization, politics and legal precedents (Abdi, Puplampu, & Dei, 2006). In the following
paragraphs, we provide a brief analysis of four dimensions of the problematic of invisibility:
epistemological, ontological, methodological and axiological.
**Figure 2: Conceptual model to address the invisibility of People of African Descent**

Legend
Outer circles – key themes to be considered
Inner blocks – dimensions or perspectives to focus the analysis
Note: The outer circles and inner blocks are meant to flow together, and not be in competition, culminating in an overlapping critical analysis.

**Epistemological invisibility**

In Canada, under the auspices of Employment Equity legislation, which provides a definition for “visible minority”, census and other data are gathered on a range of identities that fit within one rubric (Statistics Canada, 2008). The myriad differences and different experiences and backgrounds are not always dissected, nor understood, and it is conceivable that all non-Whites are forced to form a visibly non-heterogeneous ensemble, rendering the Black or African group/variable more invisible. The elasticity of the categories provided includes geographic locations (i.e., South-East Asians, South-Asian), national identities (i.e., Japanese, Chinese), and race (i.e., not White), which offers some interesting and important baselines and demographic data but can also confuse, conflate and obfuscate issues of race, racism and racialization. Are Arabs White or visible minorities? Are Latin Americans White or visible minorities? Is it a question of skin colour, lived experience, social class plus an analysis of race, or some other amalgam of variables? What about mixed race people or those of African descent who have also been enmeshed in centuries of métissage, as is the case for many Haitians, Brazilians, Cubans and others in the Americas?

The first level of invisibility for PAD, therefore, lies in the fact that they have disappeared within the formal mechanisms, grouping them together with all other “visible minorities”. It is
important to note that Canada is one of the leaders in gathering such data, which raises critical questions about how, if at all, such matters are understood in Europe and elsewhere. The second level of invisibility relates to how PAD are not even mentioned within the list of potential categories outside of the standard geographical framework within many data-collection instruments. This highlights an epistemological invisibility, with knowledge being constructed “on” and “against” people of African descent to their disadvantage at numerous levels (Tuhiwai Smith, 2006).

**Ontological Invisibility**

Ontological invisibility comes into play because PAD are denied their very existence at several levels. Moussa Iye of UNESCO provides the following analysis to frame the problem:

> Populations of African descent are the survivors of a triple negation: humanity, identity and sovereignty/citizenship. More than other human communities, these populations have been, and continue to be, victims of the most primary stigmatization, which was extremely effective and sustainable, based on the level of melanin that determines their skin colour. Owing to this, people of African descent have been continually obliged to define themselves in relation to a range of colours and values established by others. This scrutinizing regard has pushed them to be imprisoned within the imagination of others and to frantically search for a bone fide recognition. (Fanfair, 2011)

Our analysis of the ontological invisibility of PAD is buttressed by the notion that some twenty generations or more have been subjected to an assault on their being, their identity, their beliefs, and their connection with their Africanness at the individual and collective levels, with some surviving and thriving much better than others. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade has marked Africans and their descendants for the past five hundred years, and one might even consider the notion of a profoundly anchored post-traumatic stress syndrome hanging over the conscience and memory of Afro-descendants and Africans (Asante, 2003; Dei & Kempf, 2006). How can identity survive the dislocation of fundamental linkages and relations (assault on the family), the disqualification of the body (assault on phenotypes), the invalidation of thoughts and words (assault on language), the erasing of history (assault on memory), the inhibition of action (assault on self-esteem and self-empowerment and emancipation), the exclusion (assault on the belief of power that others hold on oneself and civic participation), and other forms of harm (Thésée, 2006)?

Contemporary anti-colonialist researchers, such as Abdi (2008, 2012) and Dei (with Kempf, 2006; and 2010), remind us of the deep-seated, psycho-social impact of colonialism through the foundational work of Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon. Memmi (1957), in his *Portrait du colonisateur et du colonisé*, elaborated on destructive labels ingrained into the collective consciousness through sustained exploitation and barbarous conquest, labelling the enslaved other as “savage,” “uncivilized,” “lazy,” “irrational,” “unreliable,” “unpredictable,” etc.
As an anti-colonial activist, lawyer and psychoanalyst, Fanon, in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and *Les damnés de la terre* (1970), outlined how the colonial scaffolding seeks, and often succeeds, in melding the colonized mind to the colonizer’s hegemonic grip over everything imaginable (Ghosh, Abdi & Naseem, 2008, p. 60). In the USA, slavery was a foundational structure and component to the erecting of the American identity, with a dual narrative that the country was not stolen from Indigenous peoples and, moreover, that it is a White country. Slavery morphed into Jim Crowiv, which was an insidious and prolonged period of disenfranchisement and marginalization aimed at turning Blacks against Blacks and sustaining White hegemony (Pilgrim, 2000). Within this context, the scientific ideology that served to stigmatize Africans, which was then taken to dangerous political philosophical extremes with the introduction of eugenics, contributed, along with nefarious anthropological “discoveries,” White philosophies, religious indoctrination and the hegemonic belief in military might, to the quest to ingrain a rigorously divisive notion of humanity within the minds of colonizers and the colonized (Abdi, 2008; Abdi, Puplampu, & Dei, 2006; Thésée, 2006).

**Methodological Invisibility**

A third dimension of invisibility for PAD is intertwined with methodological orientations. How can we “disappear,” or pretend that the legal, administrative, normative and procedural instruments and realities that seek to render present-day realities “neutral,” “objective,” and “colour-blind” did not exist, and, importantly, is it possible to be “neutral,” “objective,” and “colour-blind” (Abdi, 2012; Hare & Portelli, 2001; Portelli & Solomon, 2001)? The social sciences and the hard/pure/natural sciences are not excluded from this paradigm and paradox. They are also part of, have been cultivated by, and have benefitted, in perverse ways, from colonialism. Empirical research within the positivistic perspective and traditions builds on the imperialistic and neo-colonial regard on/of the “other,” focusing on the truth of what is observed, measured, dissected, and interpreted, within a colonizing gaze to understand the “other” and to construct knowledge “on and about” the “other”, significantly, without the “other” (Battiste, 2000; Tuhiiwai-Smith, 2006; Thésée, 2006). The questions asked in formulating ideas, research, theories, policy and in other influential areas inform our consciousness (Freire, 1973, 1974). Who is developing these questions, approving the conceptualizations, and endorsing these formulations, and what is the connection with PAD (Asante, 2003)?

Neo-colonial theories explicitly negate the “other,” and, moreover, frame who that “other” is, resulting in a colonial narrative that asserts itself over the formation of identity, voice, location, power, and the notion of a “visible minority” (Orelius, 2007)? According to Iris Young and Lise Noël (cited in Henderson, 2005, p. 30), systemic colonization cannot be reduced to a single definition or a unitary dimension because the prevalence of domination (exclusion from active participation) and oppression (exclusion from communication) mesh into a collective conscience that affects everyone at some level. Even new technologies supposedly intended to revolutionize thinking leading to a greater democratization often serve to further replicate inequitable social relations. The place of Afro-descendants and Africans is not a privileged one
within the academy, the world of research and laboratories leading to discoveries adapted to specific realities of PAD, which further compounds the problem (Abdi, 2012; Thésée, 2006).

Axiological Invisibility

After the epistemological, ontological and methodological considerations related to the invisibility paradox and metaphor for people of African descent, the fourth dimension could be considered perhaps even more fundamental than the others. The axiological invisibility addresses the denial of values, and existential questions and philosophies that orient, guide and stimulate African cultures (Abdi, 2008, 2012; Abdi & Richardson, 2008). More globally, this also speaks to the rejection of an African spirituality, religiosity or cultural life before the colonization that forever changed the trajectory of PAD (Jagire, 2011; Wane, Manyimo & Ritskes, 2011). The axiological invisibility results from the assault against African spiritualities by extra- and non-African influences and religions. To be Christian, Jewish or Muslim within the African context speaks to some direct connection to the colonizer, and also speaks to misogynist tendencies within the “great” religions, which are not Indigenous to PAD. The thundering silence, which reins on religious dogma, texts, traditions and sacred rites, prevents peoples and groups from engaging in a necessary process of reconciliation, forgiveness, and emancipation. Accepting and placing an unwavering allegiance to White Gods and White religious values can have the long term effect of creating a negro-phobia that permeates thinking, acting and being.

What are the African philosophies, where are they, and why are they so invisible (Adbi & Richardson, 2008; Asante, 2003)? If you ask any undergraduate or graduate class in North America or Europe to discuss philosophy, how many would raise names, notions, principles, theories and concepts from and about Africa and its philosophers (Carr & Lund, 2007)? The great (dead, White) European philosophers Hegel, Voltaire, Montesquieu and Hobbes expounded that African history and philosophy could not exist because it was not a “civilized” territory, and that it was plagued with a land of savages (Abdi, 2012). Today, scholars of African descent (Abdi, 2012; Asante, 2003; Dei, 2010; Wane et al., 2011) carry out such research, challenging colonial and neocolonial misrepresentations, seeking to provide hope for the postcolonial period in which the colonized mind could and would be replaced with a reinvigorated sense of Africanicity. Some two centuries after the Haitian Revolution and some fifty years after the independence of most African countries, it is a sad reality that colonialism is the omnipresent reality for a large percentage of those living within the PAD diaspora and the African mainland. For a bone fide liberation to take place, it is necessary to write and expound counter-narratives of the colonial era, and also to develop African philosophies and stories that build up, not down, African identity (Abdi, 2012).

For Wane, Manyimo & Ritskes (2011), in the book *Spirituality, Education and Society*, spirituality is presented as a method of healing, of developing the authentic self, a philosophy, and a way of developing relations between self and others as well as being a research methodology, an Indigenous research posture to domination, a project for individual and
collective transformation, and especially, a paradigm for the decolonization of the soul. The objective is not simply to replace Western and foreign spiritualties with African ones but rather to render visible, in the hopes of healing and developing the human spirit, the multiplicity of options that are fundamental to deconstructing the trauma caused by racist and colonized dogma (Jagire, 2011). This is where Afrocentricity can play an extremely important and constructive role in rupturing the hegemonic grasp on the imagination, thus creating the grounds for a highly meaningful and productive resistance to forces that have nefariously divided and oppressed PAD (Asante, 2003; Mazama, 2002).

**Conclusion**

The complexity of the problematic of the invisibility of people of African descent, exemplified through the trivialization and marginalization of the IYPAD, requires meaningful, critical and sustained engagement, not the superfluous, voluntary measures that have thus far served to give the illusion of inclusion and visibility (McDougall, 2011; Najcevska, 2011). While it is noble to strive for something resembling a society that values all peoples, chanting the mantra of colour-blindness, neutrality and apolitical engagement only serves to reinforce social inequalities that have been enshrined in a White-dominated world that underscores the White power, privilege, and domination known as Whiteness (Carr & Lund, 2007). One cannot speak of Blacks, Africans and the African diaspora without fully contextualizing the debate in relation to Whites, Europeans and White society, which is not to say that Whites should control the agenda or that they should determine the parameters of the discussion but that they certainly need to be problematized and critiqued as being an integral part of the slavery / colonization / segregation / disenfranchisement paradigm (Abdi, 2012; Carr, 2010; Orelius, 2007).

The tepid and equally cavalier approach to the IYPAD lays bare the intentions of the US empire and its consorts, and it also means that geopolitics at the international level is not a game for the faint of heart (Carr, 2010; Passavant & Dean, 2004). Many people around the world believe in justice, and reject war and militarization as the only or primary option, which meshes with the struggle to re-appraise the legitimate role, place, development, sovereignty and emancipation of the PAD (Abdi, Puplampu, & Dei, 2006). This is not to say that there is a pathological dysfunctionality inherent within PAD but it does acknowledge the enormous harm and damage caused to the psyche, heritage and soul of individuals and collectivities, which has affected humanity.

It is not acceptable that countries (or, rather, UN member-states) be permitted to abscond from their responsibilities, thus entrenching themselves in a modern, techno-advanced state of hyper neo-colonization, one that gives the semblance of freedom, free choice, independence, economic and political accountability, and respect for diversity while concurrently avoiding serious engagement with Africa. The UN agenda needs to be transformed, and it should include controversial, complex and problematic questions that address people of African descent, including human rights, employment, education, social status, mobility, and, although it causes
shock waves throughout the capitals of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the UN headquarters, reparations for the devastatingly destructive sustained period of slavery, enslavement and colonization that has plagued PAD to this day.

To avoid addressing these fundamental questions is to essentially engage in the highest form of treason to theoretical, conceptual and legal tenets of democracy, as defined, elaborated on and disseminated throughout the world by the United Stated (see Carr, 2010). Developing and engendering a culture of resistance requires massive efforts at the educational level, including re-making the epistemological, curricular, pedagogical, policy and institutional culture levels (see Adjei & Dei, 2008; Carr, 2010, and Thésée, 2006). Re-capturing the culture of acceptance, pride, humility, responsibility and community that resonates through the arts, the music, the literature, the dance, the oral traditions, the life-styles and the ways of constructing generations of linkages should not be undervalued (Asante, 2003).

Colonialism was not a choice made by the colonized, and having to pay for freedom the way that Haiti was required to do to France, backed by the powerful economic levers of the USA, leads to impoverishment at a number of levels. Fighting present-day colonialism in the form of leaders who take a stand in relation to poverty and relations with the former colonizers, as Aristide in Haiti, Castro in Cuba, Sankara in Burkina Faso, Nyerere in Tanzania, Allende in Chile and many others have tried, comes with a tremendous price to pay. However, race remains a central organizing principle to human political development, and can be easily discounted (Abdi, 2012; Asante, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Fanon, 1952, 1970).

Education is a clear and unrivalled institution that needs to be more fully and effectively deployed in the interests of all people. A critical, engaged, epistemologically-enlightened and meaningful educational experience, in the spirit of Freire (1973, 1974), seeking political literacy, conscientization and radical love, and Dewey (2004, 1916), exploring progressive ideas, community and citizenship, seems necessary during a time of neoliberal, pre-fabricated, employment-focused schooling (Carr, 2010; Carr & Porfilio, 2011). Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision, according to Battiste (2000), and deconstructing methodologies in search of a decolonized social environment (Tuhiwai Smith, 2006), are fundamental to the project of re-envisioning humanity. Democracy needs to be re-thought and re-made, allowing for other visions and versions that largely surpass the simplicity and alienating disenfranchisement of normative mainstream elections that appear to be losing more and more support within the broader public (Carr, 2010; Chomsky, 2008; Portelli & Solomon, 2001). This article is only the very beginning of a conversation, and does not propose, nor believe, that a comprehensive list of proposals is the answer to the PAD equation but we do firmly believe that a dynamic, engaged, vigorous and sustained debate is a necessary pre-condition to achieving some form of remedy and advancement. Ultimately, proclaiming an International Year for People of African Descent without follow-through must be challenged and confronted.

As a last point, we would like to highlight the forthcoming decade for Persons of African Descent, 2013-2023. Given the results of the 2011 IYPAD, is it worth having an entire decade with the prospect of disengaged, disinterested, trivial efforts by those nations that should be the
most concerned? Our perspective is that such a decade, as problematic as the international diplomatic context is, does offer the potential to re-conceptualize solidarity movements, strategization across cultural, political and racial lines, mobilize and re-orient scholarly work, enhance social networking in a productive way, and initiate a more public, formal as well as informal, explicit as well as implicit, and collectivist as well as individualist assessment and engagement with people of African descent. When aiming for decolonization, it is pivotal to not discard the deleterious effects of colonization so quickly that the predominant underlying causes and effects of contemporary problems are not washed away without due consideration of the systemic, all-encompassing tentacles that have locked onto human consciousness. With no illusion about the threat and risk of cooptation, marginalization and trivialization, we believe that a decade dedicated to having some level of focus on the part of the international community might all for progressive movement in relation to the rights, identities and lives of people of African descent.

Figure 3: Logo for the 2013-2023 UN International Decade for People of African Descent

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Notes

i Many of the citations for this paper have been freely translated from the original French-language version. The authors originally developed their analysis in French, thus identifying a number of specific citations in that language.

ii Some countries did recognize the IYPAD at various levels. For example, Brazil, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago developed some national activities in juxtaposition with North America and Europe, where there did not appear any formal measures taken. UNESCO, and UN organization based in Paris, developed a permanent memorial dedicated to victims of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and it also proposed series of volumes on the history of Africa (UNESCO, 2009) but these seem to be obfuscated by the overwhelming silence by nation-states that should have naturally been engaged with the IYPAD.

iii In our analysis, we examined pronouncements, programs, activities, funding, media coverage, leadership, and educational connection for IYPAD actions in the following countries: Canada, USA, France, Senegal, Jamaica, Cuba, and Brazil. We found that it was not only difficult to find any official reports or coverage for this International but, also, that for the first three countries
there was almost a quasi-embargo on anything related to the IYPAD, and the status in the
countries with more significant PAD populations exhibited limited engagement.

iv See http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm for an extensive analysis of the Jim Crow period in the USA.