

## **International Solidarity, Pan-Africanism, and the Black Panther Party**

*By*

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The Black Panther Party formed in Oakland, California in October 1966. While it had numerous goals, it emphasized a philosophy of armed self-defense, self-reliance, and interracial solidarity. Within a span of two years it had spread from this medium sized Bay Area town to cities, hamlets, and boroughs throughout the United States. Within four years it had chapters, branches, and affiliates in locales as wide ranging as Germany and France, India and Israel, New Zealand and Africa. From its inception, it called for the internationalization of the black struggle and for black Americans in particular to learn about and to identify with their own African culture and heritage. In the process, it became one of the most vilified, yet well-known human rights organizations in the world. It's identification with Africa and with others fighting for their liberation is the primary reason for its resonance among people of all racial and ethnic groups. It's willingness to stand up to the brute force of the police power inside the United States, and to insist that others world wide do the same, garnered for it a reputation and respect that continues to be felt by many the world over.

By the time the Civil Rights Movement began to garner steam in the early sixties, many black Americans viewed newly independent African, Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean countries as models to emulate when gaining their own freedom. Almost overnight, their heroes became Cuba's Fidel Castro, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, and China's Mao Tse-tung. Though they adored the leaders and the

peoples who struggled in all the Third World countries, American blacks paid particular attention to Africa, where beginning in Sudan in 1956 and Ghana in 1957, formerly colonized areas began to emerge as independent nations that fought their way to victory.<sup>5</sup>

Already having been prodded about and made aware of the assault against imperial and colonial domination by the well-traveled Muslim leader and movement icon Malcolm X, blacks came to see a sort of salvation in a connection with their African counterparts. While they realized their situation differed in many ways from their brothers and sisters in Johannesburg, South Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, Algiers, Algeria, and Accra, Ghana, they seemed also to understand that what they had in common with these struggling people was not only their African roots, but their common enemy. U.S. imperialism in Vietnam, Latin America, and other parts of the world came to be seen as the determining factor that ensured the oppression of all these groups.

This latter development in the black movement for social and economic justice is one of its most profound. Blacks' willingness to respond to violent attacks with offensive violence of their own ushered in a new stage of the movement. Love for their family and neighbors now determined their response to attacks rather than fear or the desire to remain nonviolent. Only after blacks decided to identify with their African roots did the movement begin to switch into this higher gear. Before his assassination, Malcolm X, who had been heavily influenced by the teachings of Pan Africanist pioneer Marcus Garvey, insisted this "was the key to the Black Muslim movement: its concentration on things African. . . . African origins, African languages, African ties." He taught blacks that until they could love themselves, they would not be able to get rid of the oppression that daily circumscribed their lives. This love, in his view, could only come via

identification with who they really were. So rather than being ashamed of their African origins and hating their hair, skin, thick lips, and alleged lack of culture, they should be celebrating those things whites had taught them to hate. Instead of feeling inferior or inadequate as a result of their African origin, many blacks gained confidence, seized the moment, and made a true bid for their liberation.<sup>6</sup>

Malcolm X's teachings reached audiences from Harlem to Selma, Alabama, and Boston to McComb, Mississippi. Blacks began not only to learn their true history and to identify with it, but to use this newly acquired information as ammunition against the cultural murder that had characterized their lives since the days of slavery. This recognition that they could be identified as something other than misfits, thieves, beggars, or second-class citizens led them to see a newfound unity that could serve as an important weapon in their struggle. In other words, despite the centuries of teachings to the contrary, black people, in the decade between 1957 and 1967, found reason to love themselves and they demonstrated this love by their willingness to lay down their lives for those Africans they now saw as family rather than foe. In what social critic Harold Cruse called a revolutionary "act of defiance, blacks 'like Malcolm X' . . . dared to look the white community in the face and say: 'We don't think your civilization is worth the effort of any black man to try to integrate into.'"<sup>7</sup> Newton and Seale believed his solutions "by any means necessary" represented the only viable ones. Their organization later attempted to finish the work Malcolm X started.<sup>53</sup> Newton wrote that he found it difficult to convey "the effect that Malcolm has had on the Black Panther Party" but that the group stood as "a living testament to his life work." He was careful "not to claim that the party has done what Malcolm would have done" but "Malcolm's spirit is in us."<sup>54</sup>

This newly acquired sense of direction, based on their identification as people of African descent, gave blacks the reservoir of spiritual and mental strength they needed to combat the slings and arrows of an embattled but tenacious Jim Crow system that operated in all regions of the country. Members of the nascent Black Panther Party realized their struggles were linked with the struggles of poor and working class whites as well as those who had been dispossessed by the vicissitudes of colonialism, racism, and a capitalism so avaricious it sometimes devoured human bodies for profit.

This realization that their struggle should be part and parcel of the worldwide movement against white domination and oppression created an upsurge in activity. Individuals not ordinarily inclined to participate in what heretofore had been dubbed a nonviolent exercise in futility now threw themselves headlong into the fray. Because few blacks anticipated any tangible benefits from the integrationist-oriented, southern-based movement, they saw this widening of black protest as an opportunity to make their skills and talents useful to the black freedom struggle. Thomas McCreary, one of the thousands of youths in New York City who joined the Black Power movement, commented that “because the southern movement had bypassed northern youth who had always wanted to participate, (the Black Panther Party) was welcomed with open arms.”<sup>9</sup>

After starting the party, Newton and Seale began a serious dialogue concerning solutions to some of the black liberation movement’s ideological problems. The two also tried to understand why almost all the established black political organizations experienced such limited success. While it is not clear they found the answer, they soon concluded that only the Organization of Afro-American Unity, founded by Malcolm X, because of its stance on self-defense, portended long-term success. Newton and Seale

agreed with Malcolm's conclusion that capitalism and racism were linked by the economic necessity of exploiting colonized people. They also believed Malcolm's assertion that the plight of black Americans and the people of Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America were intertwined. Malcolm X, through the organization, had hoped "to unite everyone on the continent of Africa" and "in the Western Hemisphere of African descent into one united force."<sup>52</sup> Once united, according to Malcolm, blacks would boldly assert their right to defend "themselves by whatever means necessary . . . in those areas where the government is either unable or unwilling to protect the lives and property" of black people. They agreed with Malcolm's conclusion that black America was an internal colony mirroring the rest of the colonized world. According to them, blacks, like the Vietnamese or Angolans, had to use violence to rid themselves of this oppressive situation.

It was at this point that the Panthers actively looked for support beyond their own borders. For example, the Panthers made foreign contacts with the North Koreans and the Chinese. In 1969, Cleaver visited North Korea to address the North Korean Conference of Journalists and to set up ties with the North Korean government. After this visit, both the North Korean and the Chinese governments "joined in public expressions of sympathy for black Americans and the Black Panther Party in particular." A congressional investigation of the group revealed that the governments of North Korea and China "concurred with the Panthers that the United States was the world's public enemy number one as a result of its imperialistic foreign policy and fascist domestic programs." A North Korean radio broadcast declared that the people of North Korea "expressed solidarity with the Panthers and [would] actively support and encourage their

struggle.” In 1970, North Korean Premier Kim Il Sung sent a telegram to the Panthers expressing his personal wishes “for the Panthers’ success in their just struggle to abolish . . . racial discrimination and win liberty and emancipation.” A September 23, 1970, Chinese international broadcast deplored the United States government’s treatment of the party and expressed its support for the group. According to Senate testimony, while Cleaver visited North Korea, “the regime designated August 18, 1970, as an international day of solidarity with the black people of the United States.”<sup>42</sup> These gestures went a long way in encouraging Panther recruitment and heightening the level of revolutionary violence.

In addition to support from foreign governments, the BPP also became the beneficiary of many citizen support groups overseas. Organizations in Britain, Ireland, Norway, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and the Netherlands applauded and publicized Panther activities while at the same time giving them financial and other material assistance. Matsuko Ishida, a member of the Committee to Support the Black Panther Party in Tokyo, Japan, after visiting BPP headquarters in Oakland, wrote that many of the protest groups in Japan “learned from your ideas and concrete wisdom necessary for the [survival] programs, and materialized them in their own programs.” Finally, the San Francisco-based International Committee to Release Eldridge Cleaver, in addition to its affiliates in New York, Detroit, and Atlanta, had branches in Paris, Rome, London, and Amsterdam.<sup>44</sup> Panther activity had become so respected abroad that the BPP “catalyzed indigenous insurgent organizations” in England, Bermuda, Israel, Australia, and India. According to Michael Clemons and Charles Jones, “these global social movements also assumed the BPP’s confrontational style and stance on political violence.”<sup>45</sup>

One of the primary individuals responsible for the BPP's notoriety was its Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, who criss-crossed the country urging his fellow black Americans to join the party. If they did, he guaranteed them they could become "a nationwide force and in the process of doing that we will have won many victories along the way, we will have become a powerful and upright people, and as cool as we are, we will be out of sight! And you won't find nobody on the face of the planet earth crazy enough, fool enough, to be messing with us."<sup>39</sup>

Reading of, hearing about, and viewing the experiences of others on television, the earliest members of the party and thousands of potential recruits came to believe that they could use similar methods in extricating themselves from the iron grip of American segregation, exploitation, discrimination, and brutalization. They believed that by mimicking the Vietnamese and Algerian guerrillas, by studying Che Guevara's and Malcolm X's theories and practices, they could once and for all bring about their own liberation. We can accurately say that no ethnic group, race, or nation has achieved and maintained its independence by nonviolent means. That such a thing could even happen in a world where capitalism exists seems quite far-fetched, if not altogether absurd. That such a thing has never happened should be evidence enough to demonstrate that the BPP's theory and practice were neither new nor novel. What has crippled, or at the very least, sidetracked, any in-depth public discussion of the BPP's development and demise is most scholars' unwillingness to concede that in real life, human beings are enslaved, brutalized, and lynched in exact proportion to their willingness to allow themselves to be enslaved, brutalized, and lynched.

Even so, the Panthers realized they could not win a military victory.<sup>72</sup> Thomas McCreary noted that tactically the Panthers “never expected to win a military war against the United States. We knew that at this point [in] time that wasn’t going to happen.” Instead, he said, their goal had been to “create a situation where black people would be psychologically” prepared “and willing to do this” if the time ever came. They were trying to get people to understand, he continued, “that if we could implant that [willingness to resist] into the young people growing up and get rid of that type of fear [of whites] then we would be alright.”<sup>73</sup>

As part of the process of maturing as revolutionaries, the Panthers began to understand and articulate a type internal-colony discourse. Among other things, this characterization of the black experience served to link African Americans to their Third World counterparts, also struggling against colonial domination and oppression. In *Racial Oppression in America*, Robert Blauner argued that “the experience of people of color in this country does include a number of circumstances that are universal to the colonial situation.” He wrote that blacks had been subjugated to the point where their labor did not bring them social and political advancement. He concluded that cultural policies inside the U.S. destroyed blacks’ original value system and ensured that their way of life followed that of their oppressors.<sup>10</sup> This colonial situation in black America informed Newton’s and Seale’s analysis of the black dilemma and served as a springboard from which the group launched its philosophy of armed self-defense. Like Malcolm X before them, the Panthers sincerely believed that they lived in an era of revolution and that their fight against oppression represented a significant part of the global resistance against white domination and colonization. As a result of their philosophy and activities, it was



not long before they needed to seek refuge abroad. They found safe haven in Africa, a place they considered the motherland.

After taking its independence from France in 1962, the north African country of Algeria became a center of revolutionary struggle for independence movements worldwide. Algeria agreed to host representatives of revolutionary movements, including the Black Panther Party. The Panthers' semi-diplomatic status included a building for an office and living space, a stipend from the Algerian government, and the ability to issue visas to grant asylum to other members of their struggle and to move relatively easily in and out of Algeria.

The Black Panther Party chapter in Algiers, Algeria, existed from 1969 to 1973. While the history of this chapter of the Black Panther has received very little scholarly attention, the international section of the BPP served an important role in the development of the BPP. Primarily, it connected the struggle of the black Americans with other liberation struggles throughout the world. The history and dynamics of the BPP in Algeria sheds light on the difficulties that come with living in exile, while they also provide a glimpse of a unique relationship between a liberated African nation and a quasi-diplomatic organization representing black people in the United States.

The primary role of the International Section was to communicate to other governments the needs of the BPP and the progress of the movement inside the United States. Kathleen Cleaver wrote that the villa became the "embassy of the American Revolution, receiving visitors from all over the world," and sharing news about "revolutionary developments within the United States." The Panthers believed a revolution was taking place in the United States and that they were the official

representatives for that movement. As confrontations between the Panthers and the police continued, “the international staff of the Black Panther Party increased as more fugitives seeking to avoid arrest or imprisonment fled to Algiers.” These fugitives and their activities eventually cause so much conflict with the Algerian government that the section eventually had to be abandoned.

When Pete O’ Neal took over the international section after Eldridge Cleaver departed, he was burdened with a group of Panthers and miscellaneous radicals who were growing tired and frustrated with being away from their families, friends, and the action of the frontlines. While several of the members were anxious to return to the U.S., other black revolutionaries continued to arrive in Algeria, hoping to join up with the International Section. They eventually found that they had to go to other parts of Africa to find refuge.

When it came time for Kansas City Panthers Pete and Charlotte O’Neal to leave Algeria, Charlotte convinced Pete that they should first visit comrades in Tanzania. She recalled trying to encourage his ideas while at the same time suggesting that before he goes back, he first take a detour to Tanzania where Bill and Jimmy Whitfield, also former Kansas City Panthers, had taken up residence.

In September, 1972, the O’Neals left Algeria for Tanzania, a place that Malcolm X had toured on his second trip to Africa in 1964. Upon returning to the United States, Malcolm spoke highly of Tanzania’s first President Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. Malcolm spoke of how he had gone to Africa to participate in a summit held in Cairo, Egypt. He said he had gone to get the support of African heads of state for the struggle of black people in America. He was proud of the fact that the summit passed a resolution

“condemning the continued practice of racism against the Afro-Americans in this country and thoroughly supporting the struggle of the 22 million Afro-Americans in this country for human rights.” Malcolm X credited Julius Nyerere, Tanzania’s first President, with being the driving force behind the resolution, stating that he “came forth and suggested that the African summit pass a resolution thoroughly condemning the mistreatment of Afro-Americans in America.” Nyerere also supported “the freedom struggle for human rights of our people in this country,” declared Malcolm X.

Arriving in Tanzania in late September of 1972, the O’Neals first lived in Dar es Salaam but later moved to the Arusha region in the northern part of the country where they found the climate there much more suitable. Pete O’ Neal continued to use his electrical skills and built a windmill, which made them the only people in the village with electricity.

More than thirty years after their arrival, they continue to work in the tradition of the Black Panther Party. After raising two children and learning to farm, the O’Neals opened a community center in the rural village of Imbaseni. The United African Alliance Community Center (UAACC) was officially chartered as a non-governmental organization (NGO) in 1991, although the O’Neals began offering classes long before that. Today the UAACC offers free classes in English, arts and crafts, construction, computers, and music production. They also operate a community radio station. In addition, the O’Neals partnered with former political prisoner Geronimo ji Jaga who won in 1998 won a multi million dollar settlement from the federal government for his twenty-seven year false imprisonment. The two formed a partnership and have jointly sponsored a community water project and a solar energy project. They also started a community bus

service in the village and on any given day one can see the “Gari Ya Uhuru,” meaning “free transportation,” driving up and down the dirt roads around Imbaseni Village with a picture of a black panther emblazoned on its doors.

O’Neal and his wife chose to remain in exile for over thirty years because of their commitment to the work they began in Kansas City. Their contacts and alliances abroad served as a vehicle for Panthers to participate in revolutionary activities and to continue the work of community and institution building as epitomized by the United African Alliance Community Center in Imbasseni.

Still, one has to ask, what is it about armed self-defense that is so central to black liberation? The answer may very well be found in Algerian author and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon’s writings. Fanon was a popular ideologue for black militants and explained that the readiness to employ violence was liberating for oppressed people. In a nutshell, he speaks of the catharsis of violence. He wrote that “at the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”<sup>48</sup> He wrote of how the violent actions of Algerian rebels to achieve their liberation served as an emotional purgative, only it was not fleeting.

Having joined the rest of humanity in collectively seeing self-defense as perfectly justified, many blacks immediately dropped their habit of depending on whites for their survival and advancement. The doubt and fear that kept them toiling at dead-end jobs was transformed into courage to go out and vote, to serve their communities, and to pick up arms in their own defense. Attempting to speak in one voice for blacks throughout the nation, the Panthers said to the police: “Halt in the name of humanity. You shall make no

more war on unarmed people. You will not kill another black person and walk the streets of the black community to gloat about it and sneer at the defenseless relatives of your victims. From now on, when you murder a black person . . . you may as well give it up because we will get your ASS and GOD can't hide you.”<sup>54</sup>

This catharsis, for the Panthers, seemed to have spread like wildfire after a thirsty news media absorbed then disseminated the most sensational activities of the period. In effect, striking back gave a heretofore powerless people a sense of power. This new sense of power grew into a movement that only a government as powerful as the United States could co-opt, disrupt, and crush. Before that happened, however, the Black Panther Party wrote its experiences in the annals of history and the world has not been the same since.