



REMEMBERING AUDACIOUS BLACK POWER: REVISITING THE MODEL AND MEANING

Los Angeles Sentinel, 07-14-16, p.A6

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PERIODS in the history of Black people and Black struggle is the Black Freedom Movement (1965-1975), not only because of its concrete legal, organizational, institutional, educational, economic and political gains and achievements, but also because it offers a library of lessons in righteous and relentless resistance and self-conscious community building. The Black Freedom Movement culminates in the Black Power Movement which leaves a special legacy of ideas and action worthy of study and emulation of its best thought and practice. Central to this process was the Black Power Conferences which brought the major Black Power organizations, organizers, leaders and advocates together to form a united front, pass resolutions on critical positions, and set in motion projects of enduring value.

It will not be noted and certainly not be discussed in depthful and dignity-affirming ways by the established order media, but this month marks the 50th anniversary of the historic first Black Power Conference, July 20-23, 1967. Held in Newark, it takes place in the midst of the Black Power Movement which formed the last phase of the Black Freedom Movement and which had supplanted a historically-exhausted Civil Rights Movement, the first phase, as early as 1965. The battle cry, “Black Power,” came into national consciousness in 1966 with Mukasa Willie Ricks and Kwame Ture of SNCC who made it famous and far-reaching. However, the teachings and work of Messenger Elijah Muhammad, Min. Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam had already earlier opened the way for the philosophical focus and institutional thrust the Movement would take.

In the summer of '66, Rep. Adam Clayton Powell (NY), then chair of the House Committee on Education and Labor, called together a group of leaders from across the country to discuss the meaning of Black Power as a Movement, to mark off areas of essential attention for practical initiatives and to plan a series of conferences to harness the best ideas and energy of the Movement and push it forward in collective and concrete ways. Out of this initial planning meeting, a steering committee was chosen to carry out the mandate for the conferences. This included Dr. Nathan Wright

(chair, Newark); Maulana Karenga (vice-chair, Los Angeles); Omar Ahmed (Bronx, NY); Isaiah Robinson (New York); and Chuck Stone (Washington, D.C.).

Although the definitions of Black Power were varied and numerous, they, nevertheless, tended to stress Black people’s capacity to build and control the political, economic and cultural institutions of their communities and to live free, self-determined and dignity-affirming lives in society and the world. As one of the central organizers and main theoretician of the Black Power Conferences, I sought to sum up its major areas of emphasis as a Movement and social capacity, defining it as *the struggle and capacity to achieve and sustain three things: self-determination, self-respect and self-defense.*

The goal of *self-determination* stressed the quest for control of the politics, economics and cultural institutions and processes of our communities, and to exercise and receive rightful representation and an equitable share of the resources of society. It also required a political consciousness and responsibility which result in unity, social activism and building institutions that house and advance our interests as a people. In its international aspect, Black Power supported pan-African unity, common struggle and liberation, and solidarity with Third World liberation movements.

The emphasis on *self-respect* spoke to our cultural grounding, rootedness in the best of African culture—Continental and Diasporan, reaffirming our identity, dignity and humanity in the context of our culture and thru thought and practice reflective of the best of what it means to be African and human in the world. And it meant a “return to the source” and extracting African paradigms of human excellence and achievement and using them to found, frame, forge and advance our lives. This was the meaning of Malcolm’s teaching that even though we live in the U.S. and fight for our civil and human rights, we must return “to Africa culturally, philosophically and psychologically,” to regain our sense of cultural health and existential wholeness. And it is also what Adam Clayton Powell meant when he said, speaking of the relationship between Black Power and a rightful sense of self-respect, i.e., “Black people must seek

**REMEMBERING AUDACIOUS BLACK POWER:
REVISITING THE MODEL AND MEANING**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 07-14-16, p.A6

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

audacious power—the kind of power which cradles your head among the stars and gives you the security to stand up as proud men and women eyeball to eyeball with the rest of the world.”

The stress on *self-defense* was a defiant affirmation of the right and responsibility of resistance to oppression, including armed self-defense or as Malcolm X phrased it, the right and responsibility to struggle for “freedom by any means necessary.” This placed the burden of determining how the defensive struggle was waged on the oppressor and his willingness to change in just and peaceful ways. Here Malcolm X, Robert Williams and Frantz Fanon were our teachers and tutors in the severity and savagery of the oppression and the struggle and sacrifice necessary to counter and overcome it. And we of the organization Us took them seriously.

Two major Black Power conferences were held in Newark in 1967 and in Philadelphia in 1968. At the first conference in Newark, over a thousand representatives came from across the U.S. and from Africa and the Caribbean. The second conference had even larger representation. The Newark conference conducted 14 workshops on national and international politics, economics, religion, family, culture and community and passed resolutions establishing policy in these areas.

The Black Power Movement expressed itself in organizing electoral struggles in the North and the South for the election of African American large city mayors and councilpersons, not only in Newark, but also throughout the country. Also, it produced Black party formations and Black United Front initiatives organized around the term “operational unity” put forth by this writer and defined as “unity without uniformity, unity in diversity.” Black Power also gave rise to the New Convention Movement which produced conferences and structures organized around national and international political, economic and cultural issues including: the Black Power Conferences, the Black Arts Convention, the National Black Political Conventions

in Gary and Little Rock, the Congress of African People, the National Black Assembly, the Black Women’s United Front, and the African Liberation Support Committee.

Within the context of the Black Power Movement there also developed the Black Arts Movement, the Black Studies Movement, the Black Students’ Movement, Black liberation theology, Black consciousness among Black athletes and musicians, and the revival and expansion of African consciousness and pan-Africanism among African Americans and solidarity with Third World liberation struggles. From this process there emerged cultural initiatives and creations such as *Kwanzaa*, the *Nguzo Saba* (The Seven Principles), *Kawaida* philosophy and African cultural value orientation in rites of passage programs, fashions, family forms, naming and life-cycle ceremonies, language and expanded historical and cultural learning, the independent schools movement, and the building of various cultural institutions.

The Movement declines and disappears in the mid-seventies as a result of sustained national and local police suppression, especially the FBI Cointelpro, but also thru internal contradictions and conflicts within the Movement. Nevertheless, it left a worthy and continuing legacy and remains a necessary reference for any honest and inclusive discussion of Black resistance history. This includes its emphasis on radical and revolutionary social change, reaffirmation of our Blackness and Africanness, community-building, the end of police violence, prisoners’ rights and prison reform, resistance to imperialist wars, coalition and alliance, pan-Africanism, Third World unity, self-determination, cultural grounding and revolution, and political and economic power. And it stressed the essentiality of political education, mobilization, organization and confrontation necessary to achieve these goods and goals, if the battle cry, “Liberation is coming from a Black thing,” is to be real and realized as a lived experience and practice.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org; www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org.